

VARIETY

HELLHOUNDS ON MY TRAIL: THE AFTERLIFE OF ROBERT JOHNSON

(MUSIC DOCU)

A Non Fiction Films and Mug-Shot Prods. production. Produced by Robert Mugge, Jeff Sanders. Executive producers, Julie R. Goldman, Michael Olivieri.

Directed, edited by Robert Mugge. Camera (color/B&W), Lawrence McConkey; audio director, William Barth; music recording/mixing, Big Mo; music director, Robert Santelli; stage lighting, Lance Phox; associate producers, Ellen Karas, Patty Johnson; additional camera, David Sperling, Christopher Li. Reviewed at Mill Valley Film Festival, Oct. 11, 1999. (Also in Denver Film Festival.) Running time: 95 MIN.

With: Bob Weir, Rob Wasserman, Keb' Mo', Robert Lockwood Jr., Joe Louis Walker, Billy Branch, Sonny Landreth, Chris Whitley, G. Love & Special Sauce, Tracy Nelson, Marcia Ball, Irma Thomas, Alvin Youngblood Hart, Guy Davis, Government Mule, David Honeyboy Edwards, Rory Block, Roy Rogers, Henry Townsend, Billy Hector Trio, Bill Morrissey, Peter Green, Nigel Watson.

By DENNIS HARVEY

A feast for blues fans, veteran ethnomusicologist-documentarian Robert Mugge's latest feature alternates dynamic latter-day concert footage with a bemused scrutiny of the legacy left behind by Robert Johnson — the Mississippi Delta guitar wizard and composer who died in obscurity 60 years ago, but whose scant recordings have gone on to influence generations of blues and rock musicians. Feature should have some theatrical life on the rep circuit; Fox Lorber has already slated a DVD release for January.

OCTOBER 18-24, 1999

Pic was occasioned by a week-long tribute to Johnson mounted at



MISSISSIPPI LEGEND: Robert Mugge's new docu examines the music, life and legend of blues master Robert Johnson.

Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in September 1998 by that facility's education director, Robert Santelli. Scholars are heard mulling over the minimal extant facts and myriad myths of Johnson's short life — most amusingly, viewing over and over a newly found late-'30s reel that may or may not provide a rare image of him (it doesn't, they decide), then soberly weighing the legend that he "sold his soul to the devil" in order to become a blues master.

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Site of Johnson's grave, and circumstances of his death, remain unknown; among few surviving acquaintances, childhood friend Willie Coffee is interviewed at length here, as well as the late icon's stepson, Robert Lockwood Jr. The paradox of this impoverished, shadowy and long-dead artist being feted in various upscale performance and academic milieus — and his music now generating heavy commerce and legal battles — is seldom absent from Mugge's wry perspective.

But main focus is on a stellar lineup of musicians who interpret Johnson's stark, potent songs in widely ranging styles, from veteran blues traditionalists David Honeyboy Edwards and Henry Townsend to the electrified Southern boogie band Government Mule and Chris Whitley's Hendrix-like take on the title song. Interestingly, Johnson seems to have had the greatest impact on white blues, rock and R&B musicians, most famously the Rolling Stones and Eric Clapton. Vocalists Tracy Nelson, Marcia Ball and Irma Thomas harmonize here in an impromptu roadside session; erstwhile Fleetwood Mac member Peter Green, the Grateful Dead's Bob Weir and the dazzling guitar virtuoso Roy Rogers are among many other notable performers.

Lance Phox's warm concert lighting and Mugge's multicamera setups maintain visual interest during the generous musical segs; sound recording is outstanding. Archival footage and interviews fill out the remainder of the smoothly paced, entertaining package. Vid-shot pic hadn't yet been converted to film by its Mill Valley fest showing.