

My name is Shane Louis, and you are listening to “*Forever On My Mind:*” *Blues Songwriting in the 1960s*, an Independent Study Podcast from the College of Wooster.

Introduction

I vividly remember two years ago during the Fall of 2020 sitting in my dorm room on a cold, lonely, October night in Ohio. This was one of the hardest times to be a college student, primarily because of the COVID-19 Pandemic. It was isolating, scary, and for many days quite depressing. While the rain poured outside, I was scrolling through my saved albums on Spotify trying to find something to listen to. At the time I was really into the post-apocalyptic video game *Fallout: New Vegas* and I loved listening to old Blues recordings while playing this game as it fit the lonely, desolate atmosphere perfectly. I remembered I saved an album that was recorded by an old preacher from Mississippi. I put the album on in the background, thinking nothing of it. A couple of songs into the album, I closed *Fallout* and just listened to the album without distraction. I was amazed by the scratchy guitars, passionately booming vocals, and intensely grim themes in the songs such as death, grief, hard labor, spiritual struggle, or leaving a loved one. When the album ended I started researching this musician, and it was from that day onward I became obsessed with the elusive former preacher, twice-convicted murderer, and self-proclaimed Father of the Blues: Son House.

Early Life

Eddie James House Jr., given the nickname “Son” because of his father having the same name, was born into a life that seemed at first to lead to anything but a Blues career. He was born in a small town in Mississippi named Lyon just North of Clarksdale on March 21, 1902.¹ His father was a Baptist deacon who loved playing horns in a big band. House’s father went back and forth between being involved with the Church and pursuing a career in music, which coincided with his intense alcoholic habits. House however was extremely religious when he was young, and believed in the Church deeply.

For a good part of his youth Son House detested “bluesmen” and their guitar playing. At this time in the early 20th century, the Blues was associated with partying, womanizing, excessive alcohol consumption, dancing, and venues known as “juke joints” or “barrelhouses.”² These types of venues were frequented by gamblers, heavy drinkers, and sex workers, and the entertainment for the night was typically provided by Blues musicians. As well, the religious justification for hating the Blues was grounded in the fact that it was often associated with the Devil. This came from infamous legends such as the guitarist Robert Johnson who supposedly sold his soul to the Devil at the crossroads of railroad tracks, of which Johnson proudly accounts in his most famous song “Cross Road Blues.”³

By the time he was around 15 years old, House moved with his family to New Orleans and was a full-time practicing preacher. Not only did this career line up with his religious values, but he was also getting paid well.⁴ As a preacher however, he started to struggle with something; the concept of “getting religion.” The way that Daniel E. Beaumont, a biographer of Son House,

¹ Daniel E. Beaumont, *Preachin’ the Blues: The Life and Times of Son House* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 27.

² Stephen Calt, *Barrelhouse Words: A Blues Dialect Dictionary* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2009), 12.

³ Robert Johnson, “Cross Road Blues,” recorded 1937, track 1 on *King Of The Delta Blues Singers*, Sony Music Entertainment, <https://open.spotify.com/track/1TrGdXSgiBm8W68D2K1COG?si=580a809420d94670>.

⁴ Beaumont, 32.

describes “getting religion” is as follows: “To ‘get religion’ meant in this community an intense personal experience that showed that one was ‘saved.’”⁵ This experience was extremely mysterious to a young Son House, and he yearned for it deeply. For the rest of his teen years and his early 20s, House worked odd jobs in the New Orleans area and preached on the side. Eventually he and his family would return to the Clarksdale, Mississippi area, where he would finally “get religion” while working in the fields as a farmer. And although House had been preaching for a few years, “getting religion” was the final criteria for him to finally be a registered priest.⁶

His career in preaching was short-lived. By 1927, House was disillusioned with religious practice entirely, and turned to the lifestyle of the Bluesman but without playing the Blues; excessive drinking and womanizing as much as he could. This same year House was walking around Mattson, Mississippi, when he saw a crowd gathering together. As he approached the crowd, he heard the sound of a broken glass bottle scraping against the metal strings of what seemed to be a guitar. This time, House did not feel the sense of anger and shame that he felt towards this kind of music. Instead, he was drawn to it.⁷ Soon afterward House bought his first guitar and would start his journey into the Delta Blues.

After a few years of traveling and working, in 1930 Son House would find himself wandering around in Lula, Mississippi. There he ran into a famous Blues musician by the name of Charley Patton, who at this time had several records released under the label Paramount Records. Soon after Patton told the owner of Paramount Records, Arthur Laibley, about Son House and his talent. Laibley at the time was seeking out acts like Patton and House to sell as “race records.” This conversation would eventually lead to the Grafton Sessions in 1930, where

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Beaumont, 37.

⁷ Beaumont, 38-39.

both Charley Patton and Son House recorded songs one at a time to be sold by Paramount. Two of the songs House recorded at this session, “Clarksdale Moan”⁸ and “Mississippi County Farm Blues,”⁹ would be released by Paramount that year.¹⁰ Ultimately, these records would be a commercial flop and four years later Paramount Records filed for bankruptcy. To the musical world Son House would still remain unknown, until a chance encounter in 1941.

Alan Lomax, who worked for the Library of Congress, was tasked by an African American professor named John Work from Fisk University to record various Delta Blues musicians. After recording with Muddy Waters, he told Lomax about a friend of his named Son House.¹¹ After tracking down House, Lomax recorded two separate sessions with him and a few of his friends in 1941 and 1942. These recordings were filled with energy, passion, and intense vocals. They reflected the Depression Era in the Mississippi Delta, and the heavy industrial atmosphere of wartime America. It would be from these recordings that fans of House in the 1960s would find and discover his talent and songwriting.

After these two sessions in the 1940s Son House himself would practically disappear off of the face of the Earth. For the next twenty years, House’s life was defined by constant traveling, odd jobs, and just trying to survive the harsh Delta. During this time, he did not touch a guitar once, and ultimately gave up the Blues as a lifestyle and interest altogether. In some ways, he was ashamed of his career that never came to be. To the Blues world it was as if Son House never even existed; until one fateful day in 1964.

1960s Rediscovery

⁸ Son House, “Clarksdale Moan,” recorded 1930, track 8 on *Sing Boat Songs*, Sing Boat Songs, <https://open.spotify.com/track/1DIZIyAFOdWgict2Nipvhr?si=e3edca39b4cc47ff>.

⁹ Son House, “Mississippi County Farm Blues,” recorded 1930, track 5 on *Sing Boat Songs*, Sing Boat Songs, <https://open.spotify.com/track/2BtcMctTCETwXTzp7wt0rk?si=3ea1b6ee012144fc>.

¹⁰ Beaumont, 70.

¹¹ Beaumont, 97.

Sometime in the early-1960s, three white young men in Massachusetts by the name of Dick Waterman, Phil Spiro, and Nick Perls would listen to a few strange bootleg Blues recordings from the 1940s. These were compilations of recordings that, according to Waterman, were “never supposed to be commercially released.”¹² After the three did some investigating, they found that these were recorded by a man from Mississippi named “Son House.” The trio then drove through the Mississippi Delta in 1964, and through simply asking around, found out that the man who recorded with Alan Lomax in the 1940s had relocated to Rochester, New York. The next stop for the trio was a small apartment in Rochester, where they would show up at the former preacher, hardened traveler, and former Blues guitarist’s doorstep. Waterman describes this first meeting on the liner notes of Son House’s first and only studio album: “Three young white men came to 61 Greig Street in Rochester and ended a search of three weeks and nearly 4,000 miles. They played tapes of [House’s] 1930 records and told him that there were once again people who would listen. [But] could he? [And] would he?”¹³

When in June of 1964 Son House found three random, strange, young white men at his door asking about what he did many decades ago, it is an understatement to say that House was confused if not outright stunned. Son House had no idea about the cultural boom that was happening with the Blues in the 1960s, and was completely oblivious to how many people were seeking out his presence. To most people, they thought House was dead. But there he was living and working in Rochester, New York, having not touched a guitar since his days with Lomax. Dick Waterman in particular was fixated by Son House’s presence and songwriting, and soon afterward would be his full-time manager. Waterman’s vision was to bring House’s

¹² Steve Cushing, *Pioneers of the Blues Revival* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 70.

¹³ Son House, *The Legendary Son House: Father of Folk Blues*, recorded 1965, Columbia CL 2417, 33 ½ rpm. Liner notes written by Dick Waterman.

groundbreaking songwriting and performance to the rest of America, and the first step would be to put House in front of an audience.

Son House would later be extremely thankful to Waterman in his rediscovery, saying in a television special with Buddy Guy that he did in 1968 that “I got scared and quit playing [the Blues] for sixteen years until Mr. Dick Waterman found me and gave me [the] nerve enough to try it again.”¹⁴ However at first, House was very hesitant to jump right back into Blues performances. He had not owned a guitar for nearly twenty years, so he had to buy a new one. House ended up with a National Steel Resonator guitar, which would become his main instrument for the following years of his life.¹⁵ And even after he bought a guitar for himself, he had not played the Blues in twenty years either. House ended up being re-taught by Alan Wilson, a Blues guitarist and harmonica player who played in the popular Blues band Canned Heat. Wilson was a massive fan of House, and after two weeks of practicing Son House was back to playing like he did with Alan Lomax. According to Waterman, for House “it took a unique kind of personal courage. The old songs started to come back and, with them, the driving style, the flashing metal slider across the strings, and the voice, the voice - the same low melancholy anguish flared with spontaneous falsettos. And so Son House returned from his self-imposed limbo.”¹⁶

By the fall of 1964, Son House was playing at live venues such as colleges and cafes while being managed by Dick Waterman. His audience still did not really know who he was, and did not yet appreciate his musical style. By winter House and Waterman started talking to producer John Hammond of Columbia records and decided in the spring of 1965 that Hammond

¹⁴ Kurt Hriczusah, “Son “House, Buddy Guy, Camera Three,” *YouTube* video, 24:00-24:13, June 16, 2019, <https://youtu.be/b4QamCLNnmE>.

¹⁵ Beaumont, 137.

¹⁶ Waterman, *The Legendary Son House: Father of Folk Blues*.

would produce one album for Son House. Hammond took great interest in recording with House because he never had the chance to record with Robert Johnson. According to Waterman the night that they signed the contract with Columbia Records, Son House supposedly raised a drink and gave a toast to his old friend Robert Johnson, declaring “Here’s to Robert Johnson... for being dead.”¹⁷

In April of 1965, recording began. Over the span of three days, House recorded 21 tracks total with Hammond. Within the studio there was a very large audience which eagerly watched House perform and record. House mostly recorded alone this session, performing both his old songs that he played in the 1940s and newer songs that nobody had heard before. Alan Wilson ended up playing on two of the tracks as additional guitar and harmonica. This recording session was cut into an album consisting of 9 tracks total, under the title *The Legendary Son House: Father of the Folk Blues*. This would be House’s last time recording music in a studio, but it was not nearly the last time that his impact and presence would be discussed.

The album was a hit. In the mid-1960s and even into the 1970s, House performed at large festivals and recorded television specials consistently. Son House soon became a name of legend within the world of not only Blues but also folk. He performed with other Blues musicians from his own time such as Mississippi John Hurt, Bukka White, or Skip James. But at the same time as the Blues’ popularity, the Folk Craze was also happening in the 1960s. Because of House’s raw acoustic sound, he was being compared to and praised as much as Bob Dylan or Joni Mitchell.¹⁸ For Son House, the musical culture of the 1960s was the perfect catalyst for reviving his career as a full-time Blues guitarist and performer.

¹⁷ Dick Waterman, *Between Midnight and Day* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2003), 37, quoted in Beaumont, 138.

¹⁸ Waterman, *The Legendary Son House: Father of Folk Blues*.

Son House's Songwriting

What drew audiences (including myself) into Son House's performances were not only his electrifying presentation and vocal intensity, but also his songwriting and the topics he addressed in his songs. Although Son House had just one official studio album in the 1960s, this recording session captured how Son House's songwriting shifted with the culture of the time. Along with the rapidly moving political and musical culture of the 1960s, Son House as a musician, performer, and a person adapted with these times. The songs in this album address the topics of grief, love, his preaching past, his former industrial life, and his reflection on 1960s American culture.

"Death Letter Blues" was, and still is, the song that Son House is most associated with. Not only does *Father of the Folk Blues* open with this song, but interest in the song was spurred by the White Stripes' cover of the song on their 2000 album *De Stijl*,¹⁹ and in general the band's admiration for Son House.²⁰ This song has also been covered by many other famous Blues and garage rock artists both during the 1960s and up to today. The song is in the point of view of a man who has just received a letter that a woman he loved has just died, and describes his actions and thoughts that follow. He travels and attends her funeral, cries while holding a pillow "where she used to lay," says he'll see her again on "Judgment Day," and questions why the "good Lord"²¹ would do something like this.

¹⁹ The White Stripes, "Death Letter," recorded 1999, track 6 on *De Stijl*, Third Man Records, <https://open.spotify.com/album/3jqKVacx9hnu47kCAG55T3?si=wNLMrFWmQJOBLZjlpVnHWQ>.

²⁰ Richard Middleton, "O Brother, Let's Go Down Home: Loss, Nostalgia, and the Blues." *Popular Music* Vol. 26 No. 1 (Jan. 2007), 47. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4500299>.

²¹ Son House, "Death Letter Blues," recorded 1965, disc 1 track 1 on *Father of the Delta Blues: The Complete 1965 Sessions*, Sony Music Entertainment, <https://open.spotify.com/track/0W0euvOlhbcsTydzsD4EOk?si=8d1e65f47d3040ce>.

Son House did several different versions of this song not only during this session but also live, with only some slight variations in lyrics in each version. This kind of variation in songs like “Death Letter Blues” shows the adaptability and fluidity in not only House’s songwriting, but also how he adapted to the 1960s. In 1930 when House recorded with Alan Lomax and Charley Patton, he performed a very early version of “Death Letter Blues” in a two part song titled “My Black Mama.” In the first part, House mourns a relationship with a woman that gives him “no satisfaction.”²² However the second part grants a change in tone, to House outright mourning the death of this woman after receiving a letter that she has died. Like many of the songs House recorded he was not the original creator of the lyrics or even the title. The first recorded song to have the title “Death Letter Blues” was sung by Ida Cox in 1924²³, and several other songs around this era had similar themes of receiving a letter about a death.

House directly partook in the Blues songwriting tradition of building on and transforming songs for individual expression, and by the 1960s House changed “My Black Mama” again. Instead of starting with the strained relationship, House completely shifted the focus to the death letter. He also chose to open the album with this song. Immediately the listener is thrown into a percussive and intense four minutes of passionate grief, and it sets the tone of loneliness and mourning for the rest of the album. The song and its lyrical content reflect the monotony of House’s former life in the Delta, which can be seen from the repetition of the verses and House’s mentions of everyday life such as simply waking up in the morning.²⁴ The song is one of Son House’s most morbid and depressing songs, despite sonically sounding quite jovial and upbeat.

²² Son House, “My Black Mama, Pt. 1,” recorded 1930, track 1 on *Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues: Son House*, Sony Music Entertainment, https://open.spotify.com/album/4HsEjPkFIM2XYST7SS73g4?si=DJ8X7_CsTpq4C-gi7rp-9A.

²³ Beaumont, 66.

²⁴ Julia Simon, “Narrative Time in the Blues: Son House’s ‘Death Letter’ (1965).” *American Music* Vol. 31 No. 1 (Spring 2013), 58-59, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.5406/americanmusic.31.1.0050.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A73773170b2c3d7a629a54e5aab2d96c3&ab_segments=&origin=&acceptTC=1.

The mention of “Judgment Day” in the song also introduces another trend in House’s songwriting: struggling with faith in religion.

This leads to another well known song by Son House: “Preachin’ Blues.” Stylistically, this song is very confessional and satirical in nature. It opens with the line “Yes I’m gonna get me religion, I’m gonna join the Baptist Church. You know I wanna be a Baptist preacher just so I don’t have to work.”²⁵ As well House points out hypocrisies he saw when he was a preacher describing deacons as heavy drinkers who have succumbed to “barrelhousin’.” House conveys his struggles with wanting to keep religion in his life while simultaneously wanting desperately to leave. As Blues historian Robert Palmer describes it, the song was “unusually personal” and “vividly described the tussle between the church and the blue devils for House’s soul, a tussle the church kept losing.”²⁶ In two verses that follow each other, House declares “Farewell church, may the good Lord bless your soul,” and if “I’m gonna preach these Blues...I’m gonna choose my seat and sit down,”²⁷ most likely referring to seats in a church. In this song, Son House conveys a sense of sadness, from leaving the church, and wishes he could keep some parts of his old preaching lifestyle. In some ways this song is the culmination of his preaching past and his Blues career, a phenomenon that he considered “preachin’ the Blues.”²⁸

²⁵ Son House, “Preachin’ Blues,” recorded 1965, disc 1 track 6 on *Father of the Delta Blues: The Complete 1965 Sessions*, Sony Music Entertainment, <https://open.spotify.com/track/5Tzjk30qbQyg43VkdrlHdn?si=1a3de53e38ae4b0e>.

²⁶ Palmer, 80.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Luigi Monge, “*Ramblin’ On My Mind* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2008), 229, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.5406/j.ctt1xck91.9.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A9e9fece6b997af15ef34b4bb0490ca1d&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_phrase_search%2Fcontrol&origin=.

There are also two much shorter tracks that capture House's preaching past. These two are "John the Revelator"²⁹ and "Grinnin' in Your Face,"³⁰ which are performed without guitar in an a cappella style. "John the Revelator" is a traditional gospel tune that has been covered by many other Blues musicians besides House, and "Grinnin' in Your Face" was written by House. These tracks in particular bring a sense of loneliness and sorrow to the album, as they consist only of Son House almost preaching to the listener and occasionally clapping to keep rhythm. Although he pokes fun at the religious culture in which he grew up in with "Preachin' Blues," these two gospel tracks show that House was never really the hardened apostate that he truly wished to be. These tracks show House's inability to let go of his religious past and that he is not ashamed of it during his popularity in the 1960s.

Three tracks on this album deal directly with feelings of love for what seem to be three different women; two with names and one without. The songs "Pearline" and "Louis McGhee" mention women's names and were possibly former love interests of House. These songs are very different stylistically, however. "Louise McGhee" tells the story of a woman with the same name that he used to love, and is extremely passionate and confessional. At the end of the track House states that McGhee will "forever be on [his] mind."³¹ "Pearline," in contrast, has almost no lyrics in the track, with the main chorus being simply "Love you, Pearline."³² House seems to have simply a lack of words to describe his feelings for Pearline compared to his long confession to

²⁹ Son House, "John the Revelator," recorded 1965, disc 1 track 4 on *Father of the Delta Blues: The Complete 1965 Sessions*, Sony Music Entertainment, <https://open.spotify.com/track/6Nv8dfTm2qMjJeP7OL3hO7?si=85f0ce4360a24954>.

³⁰ Son House, "Grinnin' in Your Face" recorded 1965, disc 1 track 7 on *Father of the Delta Blues: The Complete 1965 Sessions*, Sony Music Entertainment, <https://open.spotify.com/track/3ijpBVgrXmwrcabhpXEWII?si=1280389c8c0c4e21>.

³¹ Son House, "Louise McGhee," recorded 1965, disc 1 track 3 on *Father of the Delta Blues: The Complete 1965 Sessions*, Sony Music Entertainment, <https://open.spotify.com/track/67LewxEDlw2XtkmTjlMeIe?si=4aad4810ce0f49c2>.

³² Son House, "Pearline," recorded 1965, disc 1 track 2 on *Father of the Delta Blues: The Complete 1965 Sessions*, Sony Music Entertainment, <https://open.spotify.com/track/14XkjQJ58JSDoUTonToUUe?si=9bec22afe343419e>.

Louis McGhee. This track is extremely slow and intimate, and because of the lack of lyricism and instrumentation you can hear what appears to be House's heartbeat during the track (most likely because the microphone was right next to his chest to record the guitar) which adds even more intimacy and loneliness to the album. And finally, the track "Sundown" describes House's feeling of loneliness he feels when "the sun go down."³³ This is very similar and is almost a second part to "Death Letter," as House also describes his feelings when the sun sets after receiving the letter. In this track he even describes the genre in which he performs, declaring the Blues as "a worried old hard disease."

The songs "Empire State Express"³⁴ and "Levee Camp Moan"³⁵ are very similar in theme, in that they describe harsh industrial labor and landscapes. Both of these songs as well are the only songs that House did not perform alone, with Alan Wilson joining on second guitar and harmonica. When Waterman and friends met Son House for the first time he was working at a railway station in Rochester, so it is very likely that "Empire State Express" was his reflection on working at the station. House and Wilson's coordinated guitars almost sound like a train rolling along, and is the most energetic song on the album. "Levee Camp Moan" is the longest track on the album, clocking in at an incredible nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds. This song recounts the harsh industrial realities of working on a levee, most likely one of the many levees built on the Mississippi River. House worked industrial jobs a lot of his life, and it is quite possible he worked this kind of job before. This track also ends the album, and represents his final departure from both his industrial past and his life from the Delta.

³³ Son House, "Sundown," recorded 1965, disc 1 track 8 on *Father of the Delta Blues: The Complete 1965 Sessions*, Sony Music Entertainment, <https://open.spotify.com/track/5Tzjk30qbOyg43VkdrlHdn?si=6fff549c2a6a47ce>.

³⁴ Son House, "Empire State Express," recorded 1965, disc 1 track 5 on *Father of the Delta Blues: The Complete 1965 Sessions*, Sony Music Entertainment, <https://open.spotify.com/track/1v0undu7Fj5tl9oPwEwvuV?si=e3fb0d239e8d408c>.

³⁵ Son House, "Levee Camp Moan," recorded 1965, disc 1 track 9 on *Father of the Delta Blues: The Complete 1965 Sessions*, Sony Music Entertainment, <https://open.spotify.com/track/4Uuc4yWgVoVbIMvL8mSDs5?si=83f7e8f67b8548af>.

And finally, I will be highlighting a fascinating track that did not make it on the final album. The song is titled simply “President Kennedy,” and the lyrics mourn the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963. However, the Waltz-style musical structure of the song is the exact same as a song he performed for Alan Lomax in 1942 called “American Defence.” This song is strange in the context of Son House’s lyrics. It is a satirical song that pokes fun at America’s war with Japan, where House jokingly encourages citizens to contribute to the war effort and even mentions General Douglas MacArthur by name. However at the end, Son House grimly declares that “This war’ll end creation,” but that there is “No use in sheddin’ tears” and “no use in having no fears” as “this war may last you for years.”³⁶ House adapted this Waltz structure to yet again comment on the grimness of American society, but this time in an even more morbid sense. “President Kennedy” is not at all satirical or joking in nature, but instead shows House’s feelings of sorrow he has for the Kennedy family. It is also possible that President Kennedy resonated with House as a Black American, especially Kennedy’s presidential promises to promote equal rights amongst Black and white Americans.

“President Kennedy” was not released on the original cut of the album and instead can be listened to on later releases that include it as a bonus track. The track opens with John Hammond telling House to “take it away,” with House first mourning John F. Kennedy’s death and calling him “the best friend we had.”³⁷ For the rest of the track he mourns for the Kennedy family who had to see him die, and ends each verse with: “Now I can’t muchin’ tell, It’ll last me for years, His memory still rings in my ears.”³⁸ Not only is House expressing the grief he feels for the

³⁶ Son House, “American Defence,” recorded 1942, track 12 on *Son House Library of Congress Recordings 1941-1942*, Document Records, <https://open.spotify.com/track/29kmWqBAsPFFxZqiEuq5ui?si=ce12a67b8d294511>.

³⁷ Son House, “President Kennedy,” recorded 1965, disc 2 track 6 on *Father of the Delta Blues: The Complete 1965 Sessions*, Sony Music Entertainment, <https://open.spotify.com/track/2tsRDjOGkvD2pnXeRODnX0?si=0a4105a9a1cd435c>.

³⁸ Ibid.

Kennedys having lost a family member, but is also declaring that the memory of Kennedy himself will live on in House's mind.

Son House's song "President Kennedy" perfectly exemplifies how his songwriting changed and adapted to the turbulent decade of the 1960s. House used a song in which he previously commented on American political culture in the 1940s and rewrote it for the 1960s. However, instead of satire he changes this song to express his collective sorrow he has with the Kennedy family. I have not been able to find any previous analysis of this song. Daniel Beaumont provides some analysis of "American Defence," which he describes as "a wry moment of American patriotism [House] composed a waltz-time song about the war effort."³⁹ It is very possible that House was working industrial jobs at this time where he encountered these attitudes, and this song was the result of that. However with "President Kennedy," House most likely heard about the assassination from news sources and wished to express his collective sorrow that the nation was feeling for the President.

Son House's adaptive songwriting that reflected the cultural landscape of the 1960s was what drew audiences into his performances and discography. With this single album and his electrifying performances, he showed his audience that he did not stay in the past at all. Instead, he proved that he was as relevant and able to adapt like songwriters such as Bob Dylan, and even his other Blues peers. But although his songwriting adapted, he remained unapologetically himself as a former preacher, a Blues songwriter, a performer, and an inspiration to many. Songs like "President Kennedy" show that for Blues songwriters like Son House, American culture in the 1960s impacted and shifted their songwriting. Blue songwriting did not stay static or simply get absorbed by the greater music culture of the 1960s, but instead remained an integral part of it.

³⁹ Beaumont, 107.

House's songwriting was also directly impacted by his lived experiences. His experience as a preacher gave him the confidence and charisma necessary to deal with and perform for an audience. The Blues replaced preaching in House's life for his emotional expression and public storytelling. As Beaumont states in House's biography, "His blues drew upon and gave expression to certain profound conflicts that simmered in the darker recesses of his mind. That was one of the reasons for him taking up music... House thought that, just as a good sermon ought to have a central theme, a Blues song should have thematic coherence."⁴⁰ House's rediscovery gave him the opportunity to present his unique songwriting. And although this was only conveyed in one studio album, *Father of the Folk Blues* truly told the story of Son House's life and how his life changed in the 1960s.

Conclusion

A month after recording *Father of the Folk Blues* with Columbia Records, Son House toured the West Coast. On May 14, 1965, House found himself in Los Angeles to perform at the UCLA Folk Festival along with other contemporary acoustic Blues musicians. While in L.A., House had heard that an old friend of his from the Delta was in town filming a television special with the extremely popular Rolling Stones.⁴¹ Upon finding out, Dick Waterman and House immediately set off to find the studio where this special was being recorded. House greeted his friend with great joy, and was thrilled to be reconnected with a fellow musician from his past. The friend that House was so overjoyed to see was almost 7 feet tall, had a booming, scratchy, harrowing voice, and played the Blues with ear screeching guitars that nearly deafened his audience. This man was known to Blues fans across America as simply "Howlin' Wolf."

⁴⁰ Beaumont, 56.

⁴¹ Beaumont, 141-142.