

ROBERT JOHNSON, MYTHMAKING, AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CULTURE

Patricia R. Schroeder

Suddenly Robert Johnson is everywhere.

Though the Mississippi bluesman died young and recorded only twenty-nine songs, the legacy, legend, and lore surrounding him continue to grow. Focusing on these developments, Patricia R. Schroeder's *Robert Johnson, Mythmaking, and Contemporary American Culture* breaks new ground in Johnson scholarship, going beyond simple or speculative biography to explore him in his larger role as a contemporary cultural icon.

Part literary analysis, part cultural criticism, and part biographical study, *Robert Johnson, Mythmaking, and Contemporary American Culture* shows the Robert Johnson of today to be less a two-dimensional character fixed by the few known facts of his life than a dynamic and contested set of ideas.

Represented in novels, in plays, and even on a postage stamp, he provides inspiration for "highbrow" cultural artifacts—such as poems—as well as Hollywood movies and T-shirts. Schroeder's detailed and scholarly analysis directly engages key images and stories about Johnson (such as the Faustian crossroads exchange of his soul for guitar virtuosity),

navigating the many competing interpretations that swirl around him to reveal the cultural purposes these stories and their tellers serve.

Unprecedented in both range and depth, Schroeder's work is a fascinating examination of the relationships among Johnson's life, its subsequent portrayals, and the cultural forces that drove these representations. With penetrating insights into both Johnson and the society that perpetuates him, *Robert Johnson, Mythmaking, and Contemporary American Culture* is essential reading for cultural critics and blues fans alike.

PATRICIA R. SCHROEDER is a professor of English at Ursinus College, where she teaches blues traditions in American literature, African American literature, American drama, and American literature. She is the author of *The Feminist Possibilities of Dramatic Realism* and *The Presence of the Past in Modern American Drama*.