

By: Senator(s) Horhn

To: Rules

## SENATE RESOLUTION NO. 1

1 A RESOLUTION COMMEMORATING THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF NOTED 1920s  
2 MISSISSIPPI BLUESMAN TOMMY JOHNSON OF CRYSTAL SPRINGS,  
3 MISSISSIPPI, ON THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF HIS DEATH.

4 WHEREAS, next to Son House and Charley Patton, no one was  
5 more important to the development of pre-Robert Johnson Delta  
6 blues than Tommy Johnson. Armed with a powerful voice that could  
7 go from a growl to an eerie falsetto range and a guitar style that  
8 had all of the early figures and licks of the Delta style clearly  
9 delineated, Johnson only recorded for two years, from 1928 to  
10 1930, but left behind a body of work that's hard to ignore; and

11 WHEREAS, there is no doubt that the music of Tommy Johnson  
12 epitomized the Mississippi Blues at its most expressive and  
13 poetic. Johnson achieved the perfection of a regional vocal and  
14 instrumental tradition, while realizing its potential for the  
15 development of a unique and personal means of communication. He  
16 was an individualist, whose sense of timing and rhythm, sensitive  
17 guitar playing and impressive vocal range were innate; and

18 WHEREAS, the legend of Tommy Johnson is even harder to  
19 ignore. The stories about his live performances, where he would  
20 play the guitar behind his neck in emulation of Charley Patton's  
21 showboating while hollering the blues at full throated level for  
22 hours without a break, are part of his legend, as is his  
23 uncontrolled lifestyle, which constantly got him in trouble. Then  
24 there's the crossroads story. Years before the "Deal with the  
25 Devil" at a deserted Delta crossroad was being used as an  
26 explanation of the other-worldly abilities of young Robert  
27 Johnson, the story was being told repeatedly about Tommy, often by

28 the man himself to reinforce his abilities to doubting audiences;  
29 and

30 WHEREAS, his "Cool Water Blues" was covered in the 1950s by  
31 one of his early admirers, Howlin' Wolf, and became "I Asked for  
32 Water (She Brought Me Gasoline)." Another signature piece, his  
33 "Maggie Campbell," came with a chord progression that was used for  
34 infinite variations by blues players dating all the way back to  
35 his contemporary Charley Patton. Two of his best-known numbers  
36 have survived into modern times: "Big Road Blues" is probably  
37 best known to contemporary blues fans from adaptations by Floyd  
38 Jones and others, while his "Canned Heat Blues" was the tune that  
39 gave a California blues-rock band their name; and

40 WHEREAS, in 1916, Tommy Johnson married Maggie Bidwell and  
41 the couple moved to Webb Jennings' Plantation near Drew, in  
42 Mississippi's Yazoo Delta region close to Dockery's Plantation.  
43 Although Johnson had several wives, it was his first whom he later  
44 immortalized in the song "Maggie Campbell Blues." Johnson soon  
45 fell under the spell of Dockery resident Charley Patton and local  
46 guitarists Dick Bankston and Willie Brown. He lived there for a  
47 year, learning the nuances of the Delta style before moving on to  
48 hobo around Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi. Johnson then  
49 moved back to Crystal Springs, Mississippi, in 1920. He also  
50 returned to life as a sharecropper, playing at parties on the  
51 weekends or on the streets of Jackson and nearby towns for tips.  
52 During the fall cotton harvest season, Johnson traveled back to  
53 the Delta, playing for sharecroppers who had just been paid.  
54 During the early 1920s, he gigged in Greenwood, Mississippi, and  
55 nearby Moorehead. The latter is famous for its railroad crossing  
56 where the Southern Crosses the Dog, heralded in W.C. Handy's  
57 "Yellow Dog Blues"; and

58 WHEREAS, Tommy Johnson died of a heart attack after playing  
59 at a party on November 1, 1956. He is buried in the Warm Springs  
60 Methodist Church Cemetery in Crystal Springs, Mississippi. In

61 July 2001, the Warm Springs Cemetery was designated a historically  
62 significant abandoned cemetery by the Board of Trustees of the  
63 Department of Archives and History; and through the efforts of  
64 interested citizens and civic leaders, this important historic  
65 cemetery was restored and is now maintained; and

66 WHEREAS, the influence of Tommy Johnson's music is still felt  
67 both in black folk tradition and among young white musicians, who  
68 have helped spread something of his style of singing and playing  
69 blues around the world:

70 NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE OF THE STATE OF  
71 MISSISSIPPI, That we do hereby commemorate the life and important  
72 music legacy of noted 1920s Mississippi Bluesman Tommy Johnson of  
73 Crystal Springs, Mississippi, on the 50th Anniversary of his  
74 death.

75 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That this resolution be forwarded to  
76 the Mississippi Blues Commission and be made available to the  
77 members of the Capital Press Corps.