

COURT OF CRIMINAL APPEALS OF TENNESSEE

State of Tennessee v. Justin Johnson a/k/a Straight Drop

No. W2025-00127-CCA-R3-CD (Tenn. Crim. App. Mar. 10, 2026) · No. W2025-00127-CCA-R3-CD · Decided March 10, 2026

SUMMARY

The Tennessee Court of Criminal Appeals affirmed Justin Johnson's convictions for conspiracy to commit first degree murder, first degree premeditated murder, and possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. The court rejected challenges concerning the sufficiency of the evidence, crime-scene and autopsy photographs, the defendant's seating during trial, prosecutorial closing arguments, and cumulative error. The convictions arose from the November 17, 2021 shooting death of rapper Adolph Thornton Jr. in Memphis.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Court of Criminal Appeals of Tennessee
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Matthew J. Wilson; Kyle A. Hixson; Steven W. Sword
JURISDICTION	Tennessee Court of Criminal Appeals
DECIDED	March 10, 2026
DOCKET	W2025-00127-CCA-R3-CD
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Defendant appealed as of right from judgments of the Criminal Court for Shelby County following convictions for conspiracy to commit first degree murder, first degree premeditated murder, and possession of a firearm as a convicted felon.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Sufficiency of the evidence is reviewed by determining whether, viewing the evidence in the light most favorable to the prosecution and giving the State the strongest legitimate view of the evidence and reasonable inferences, any rational trier of fact could have found the essential elements beyond a reasonable doubt. Evidentiary rulings concerning photographs are reviewed for abuse of discretion. The denial of a request to sit at counsel table is reviewed for abuse of discretion. Unpreserved prosecutorial-misconduct claims raised in a motion for new trial are reviewed for plain error. Cumulative-error claims require multiple errors whose aggregate effect deprived the defendant of a fair trial.

PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published Tennessee Court of Criminal Appeals opinion
PARTIES	Justin Johnson a/k/a Straight Drop v. State of Tennessee

TOPICS

criminal procedure evidence appellate procedure standard of review preservation of error

PRACTICE AREAS

criminal law criminal procedure evidence appellate procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the evidence was sufficient to support convictions for conspiracy to commit first degree premeditated murder, first degree premeditated murder, and possession of a firearm by a convicted felon.
2. Whether the trial court abused its discretion by admitting one autopsy photograph and one crime-scene photograph of the victim.
3. Whether the trial court abused its discretion or violated Johnson's constitutional rights by requiring him to sit behind defense counsel rather than at counsel table.
4. Whether the prosecutor's rebuttal argument concerning codefendant Hernandez Govan as an absent witness constituted plain error.
5. Whether cumulative error required a new trial.

HOLDINGS

1. The evidence was sufficient to support all three convictions.
2. The trial court did not abuse its discretion by admitting the challenged autopsy and crime-scene photographs.
3. The trial court did not abuse its discretion or violate Johnson's constitutional rights by requiring him to sit behind defense counsel because of security concerns.
4. Johnson was not entitled to plain-error relief based on the prosecutor's rebuttal comments concerning Govan as an absent witness.
5. The cumulative-error doctrine did not warrant relief because Johnson failed to establish any error warranting relief.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"The instances are rare when the trial court should not allow the defendant to sit at counsel table." (at 21-22)

"A criminal conviction should not be lightly overturned solely on the basis of the prosecutor's closing argument." (at 24)

"Because Defendant has failed to establish any error warranting relief, he is not entitled to relief under the cumulative error doctrine." (at 27)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

The convictions arose from the November 17, 2021 shooting death of Adolph Thornton, Jr., at a cookie shop in Memphis. The proof showed that Johnson and Cornelius Smith agreed to kill Thornton pursuant to a bounty, obtained and used firearms and a vehicle, followed Thornton to the shop, and fired at him. The State relied on Smith's testimony, surveillance video, cell-phone records, forensic evidence, post-shooting conduct, and evidence that Johnson fled and attempted to conceal his involvement.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

A Shelby County grand jury indicted Johnson and several codefendants. The State dismissed several counts before Johnson's separate September 2024 trial. The jury convicted Johnson on the three remaining counts, and the trial court imposed an effective sentence of life imprisonment plus thirty-five years. The trial court denied his motion for new trial, and the Court of Criminal Appeals affirmed.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- State v. Thomas, 687 S.W.3d 223, 242, 245, 248 (Tenn. 2024)
- State v. Slayter, No. M2024-01280-CCA-R9-CO, 2025 WL 688920, at *5-6 (Tenn. Crim. App. Mar. 3, 2025)
- Jackson v. Virginia, 443 U.S. 307, 319 (1979)
- State v. Davis, 354 S.W.3d 718, 729 (Tenn. 2011)
- State v. Williams, 558 S.W.3d 633, 638 (Tenn. 2018)
- State v. Dorantes, 331 S.W.3d 370, 379 (Tenn. 2011)
- State v. Sisk, 343 S.W.3d 60, 65 (Tenn. 2011)
- State v. Stephens, 521 S.W.3d 718, 724 (Tenn. 2017)
- State v. Reynolds, 635 S.W.3d 893, 915-17 (Tenn. 2021)
- State v. Young, 196 S.W.3d 85, 108 (Tenn. 2006)
- State v. Davidson, 121 S.W.3d 600, 615 (Tenn. 2003)
- State v. Leach, 148 S.W.3d 42, 53 (Tenn. 2004)
- State v. Pike, 978 S.W.2d 904, 915 (Tenn. 1998)
- State v. Shropshire, 874 S.W.2d 634, 641 (Tenn. Crim. App. 1993)
- State v. Gaylor, 862 S.W.2d 546, 553 (Tenn. Crim. App. 1992)
- Randolph v. State, 570 S.W.2d 869, 871 (Tenn. Crim. App. 1978)
- State v. Willis, 496 S.W.3d 653, 726-29 (Tenn. 2016)
- State v. Carruthers, 35 S.W.3d 516, 576-77 (Tenn. 2000)
- State v. Van Tran, 864 S.W.2d 465, 477 (Tenn. 1993)
- Lee Med., Inc. v. Beecher, 312 S.W.3d 515, 524 (Tenn. 2010)

- White v. Vanderbilt Univ., 21 S.W.3d 215, 223 (Tenn. Ct. App. 1999)
- State v. Banks, 564 S.W.2d 947, 949-51 (Tenn. 1978)
- Milam v. Commonwealth, 275 S.W.2d 921 (Ky. 1955)
- State v. Williamson, No. M2010-01067-CCA-R3-CD, 2011 WL 3557827, at *9 (Tenn. Crim. App. Aug. 12, 2011)
- State v. Smith, 492 S.W.3d 224, 243-44 (Tenn. 2016)
- State v. Rice, 184 S.W.3d 646, 674-75 (Tenn. 2006)
- State v. Carpenter, No. W2022-01710-CCA-R3-CD, 2023 WL 6441953, at *10-11 (Tenn. Crim. App. Oct. 3, 2023)
- State v. Walker, No. W2019-00751-CCA-R3-CD, 2021 WL 4496508, at *7 (Tenn. Crim. App. Oct. 1, 2021)
- United States v. Darden, 364 F. Supp. 3d 798, 800 (M.D. Tenn. 2019)
- State v. Banks, 271 S.W.3d 90, 130-31, 170 (Tenn. 2008)
- State v. Goltz, 111 S.W.3d 1, 5-6 (Tenn. Crim. App. 2003)
- State v. Buck, 670 S.W.2d 600, 609 (Tenn. 1984)
- Judge v. State, 539 S.W.2d 340, 344 (Tenn. Crim. App. 1976)
- State v. Enix, 653 S.W.3d 692, 700-01 (Tenn. 2022)
- State v. Bledsoe, 226 S.W.3d 349, 354 (Tenn. 2007)
- State v. Page, 184 S.W.3d 223, 231 (Tenn. 2006)
- State v. Linville, 647 S.W.3d 344, 353-54 (Tenn. 2022)
- State v. Smith, 24 S.W.3d 274, 282-83 (Tenn. 2000)
- United States v. Olano, 507 U.S. 725, 731-32 (1993)
- State v. Martin, 505 S.W.3d 492, 504 (Tenn. 2016)
- State v. Hester, 324 S.W.3d 1, 76 (Tenn. 2010)
- State v. Leath, 461 S.W.3d 73, 116 (Tenn. Crim. App. 2013)