

Blind Lemon Jefferson

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Background information

Birth name	Lemon Henry Jefferson
	Also known as Deacon L. J. Bates
Born	September 24, 1893 ^[1]
	Coutchman, Texas, U.S.
Origin	Texas
Died	December 19, 1929 (aged 36)
	Chicago, Illinois, U.S.
Genres	Blues, gospel blues
Occupation(s)	Singer-songwriter, musician

Instruments	Guitar
Years active	1900s–1929
Labels	Paramount Records, Okeh Records
Notable instruments	Acoustic Guitar

"Blind" Lemon Jefferson (born Lemon Henry Jefferson; September 24, 1893 – December 19, 1929) was an American blues and gospel blues singer and guitarist from Texas. He was one of the most popular blues singers of the 1920s, and has been called "Father of the Texas Blues".

Jefferson's performances were distinctive as a result of his high-pitched voice and the originality on his guitar playing. Although his recordings sold well, he was not so influential on some younger blues singers of his generation, who could not imitate him as easily as they could other commercially successful artists. Later blues and rock and roll musicians, however, did attempt to imitate both his songs and his musical style.

Biography

Early life

Jefferson was born blind, near Coutchman in Freestone County, near present-day Wortham, Texas. He was one of eight children born to sharecroppers Alex and Clarissa Jefferson. Disputes regarding his exact birth date derive from contradictory census records and draft registration records. By 1900, the family was farming southeast of Streetman, Texas, and Lemon Jefferson's birth date is indicated as September 1893 in the 1900 census. The 1910 census, taken in May before his birthday, further confirms his year of birth as 1893, and indicated the family was farming northwest of Wortham, near Lemon Jefferson's birthplace.

In his 1917 draft registration, Jefferson gave his birth date as October 26, 1894, further stating that he then lived in Dallas, Texas and had been blind since birth.[6] In the 1920 Census, he is recorded as having returned to Freestone County and was living with his half-brother, Kit Banks, on a farm between Wortham and Streetman.

Jefferson began playing the guitar in his early teens, and soon after he began performing at picnics and parties. He became a street musician, playing in East Texas towns, in front of barbershops and on streetcorners. According to his cousin, Alec Jefferson, quoted in the notes for Blind Lemon Jefferson, *Classic Sides*:

They were rough. Men were hustling women and selling bootleg and Lemon was singing for them all night... he'd start singing about eight and go on until four in the morning... mostly it would be just him sitting there and playing and singing all night.

In the early 1910s, Jefferson began traveling frequently to Dallas, where he met and played with fellow blues musician Lead Belly. In Dallas, Jefferson was one of the earliest and most prominent figures in the blues movement developing in the Deep Ellum section of Dallas. Jefferson likely moved to Deep Ellum in a more permanent fashion by 1917, where he met Aaron Thibeaux Walker, also known as T-Bone Walker. Jefferson taught Walker the basics of blues guitar in exchange for Walker's occasional services as a guide. By the early 1920s, Jefferson was earning enough money for his musical performances to support a wife, and possibly a child. However, firm evidence for both his marriage and any offspring is unavailable.

Beginning of recording career

Prior to Jefferson, very few artists had recorded solo voice and blues guitar, the first of which was vocalist Sara Martin and guitarist Sylvester Weaver. Jefferson's music is uninhibited and represented the classic sounds of everyday life from a honky-tonk to a country picnic to street corner blues to work in the burgeoning oil fields, a further reflection of his interest in mechanical objects and processes.

Jefferson did what very few had ever done – he became a successful solo guitarist and male vocalist in the commercial recording world. Unlike many artists who were "discovered" and recorded in their normal venues, in December 1925 or January 1926, he was taken to Chicago, Illinois, to record his first tracks. Uncharacteristically, Jefferson's first two recordings from this session were gospel songs ("I Want to be like Jesus in my Heart" and "All I Want is that Pure Religion"), released under the name Deacon L. J. Bates. This led to a second recording session in March 1926. His first releases under his own name, "Booster Blues" and "Dry Southern Blues", were hits; this led to the release of the other two songs from that session, "Got the Blues" and "Long Lonesome Blues," which became a runaway success, with sales in six figures. He recorded about 100 tracks between 1926 and 1929; 43 records were issued, all but one for Paramount Records. Unfortunately, Paramount Records' studio techniques and quality were poor, and the resulting recordings were released with poor sound quality. In fact, in May 1926, Paramount had Jefferson re-record his hits "Got the Blues" and "Long Lonesome Blues" in the superior facilities at Marsh Laboratories, and subsequent releases used those version. Both versions appear on compilation albums and may be compared.

Success with Paramount records

Largely due to the popularity of artists such as Blind Lemon Jefferson and contemporaries such as Blind Blake and Ma Rainey, Paramount became the leading recording company for the blues in the 1920s. Jefferson's earnings reputedly enabled him to buy a car and employ chauffeurs (although there is debate over the reliability of this as well); he was given a Ford car "worth over \$700" by Mayo Williams, Paramount's connection with the black community. This was a frequently-seen compensation for recording rights in that market. Jefferson is known to have done an unusual amount of traveling for the time in the American South, which is reflected in the difficulty of pigeonholing his music into one regional category.

Jefferson's "old-fashioned" sound and confident musicianship made him easy to market. His skillful guitar playing and impressive vocal ranges opened the door for a new generation of male solo blues performers such as Furry Lewis, Charlie Patton, and Barbecue Bob. He sticks to no musical conventions, varying his riffs and rhythm and singing complex and expressive lyrics in a manner exceptional at the time for a "simple country blues singer." According to North Carolina musician Walter Davis, Jefferson played on the streets in Johnson City, Tennessee, during the early 1920s at which time Davis and fellow entertainer Clarence Greene learned the art of blues guitar.

Jefferson was reputedly unhappy with his royalties (although Williams said that Jefferson had a bank account containing as much as \$1500). In 1927, when Williams moved to Okeh Records, he took Jefferson with him, and Okeh quickly recorded and released Jefferson's "Matchbox Blues" backed with "Black Snake Moan," which was to be his only Okeh

recording, probably because of contractual obligations with Paramount. Jefferson's two songs released on Okeh have considerably better sound quality than on his Paramount records at the time. When he had returned to Paramount a few months later, "Matchbox Blues" had already become such a hit that Paramount re-recorded and released two new versions, under producer Arthur Laibly. In 1927, Jefferson recorded another of his now classic songs, the haunting "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean" (once again using the pseudonym Deacon L. J. Bates) along with two other uncharacteristically spiritual songs, "He Arose from the Dead" and "Where Shall I Be". Of the three, "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean" was so successful that it was re-recorded and re-released in 1928.

Death and grave

Jefferson died in Chicago at 10:00 am on December 19, 1929, of what his death certificate called "probably acute myocarditis". For many years, apocryphal rumors circulated that a jealous lover had poisoned his coffee, but a more likely scenario is that he died of a heart attack after becoming disoriented during a snowstorm. Some have said that Jefferson died from a heart attack after being attacked by a dog in the middle of the night. More recently, the book, Tolbert's Texas, claimed that he was killed while being robbed of a large royalty payment by a guide escorting him to Union Station to catch a train home to Texas. Paramount Records paid for the return of his body to Texas by train, accompanied by pianist William Ezell.

Jefferson was buried at Wortham Negro Cemetery (later Wortham Black Cemetery). Far from his grave being kept clean, it was unmarked until 1967, when a Texas Historical Marker was erected in the general area of his plot, the precise location being unknown. By 1996, the cemetery and marker were in poor condition, but a new granite headstone was erected in 1997. In 2007, the cemetery's name was changed to Blind Lemon Memorial Cemetery and his gravesite is kept clean by a cemetery committee in Wortham, Texas.

Discography and awards

Jefferson had an intricate and fast style of guitar playing and a particularly high-pitched voice. He was a founder of the Texas blues sound and an important influence on other blues singers and guitarists, including Lead Belly and Lightnin' Hopkins.

He was the author of many tunes covered by later musicians, including the classic "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean". Another of his tunes, "Matchbox Blues", was recorded more than 30 years later by The Beatles, albeit in a rockabilly version credited to Carl Perkins, who himself did not credit Jefferson on his 1955 recording.

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame listed Jefferson's 1927 recording "Matchbox Blues" one of the 500 songs that shaped rock and roll. Jefferson was among the inaugural class of blues musicians inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame in 1980.

Cover versions

Bukka White - "Jack O'diamonds" on Bukka White - 1963 Isn't 1962 released in the 1990s

Bob Dylan – "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean" on Bob Dylan

Grateful Dead – "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean" as "One Kind Favor" on Birth of the Dead

Merl Saunders/Jerry Garcia/John Kahn/Bil Vitt – "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean" as "One Kind Favor" on Keystone Encores Volume I

John Hammond – "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean" as "One Kind Favor" on John Hammond Live

B.B. King – "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean" on One Kind Favor

Peter, Paul & Mary – "See That My Grave is Kept Clean," reworked as "One Kind Favor" on In Concert

Kelly Joe Phelps – "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean" on Roll Away The Stone

Counting Crows – "Mean Jumper Blues". Counting Crows lead singer Adam Duritz accidentally claimed credit for "Mean Jumper Blues" in the liner notes of the Deluxe Edition reissue of the album August And Everything After. The cover was featured as part of a selection of early demo tracks. Immediately after the error was brought to his attention, Duritz apologized in his personal blog.

Laibach – "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean" on SPECTRE

Pat Donohue – "See that My Grave Is Kept Clean" as One Kind Favor (live on Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion") and later released on the CD Radio Blues.

Corey Harris - "Jack O'diamonds" on Fish Ain't Bitin' released 1997

In popular culture

In 2009, Grammy nominated R&B act Yarbrough and Peoples were co-produced and were featured in the Off-Broadway production Blind Lemon Blues.

A tribute song, "My Buddy Blind Papa Lemon", was recorded for Paramount Records in 1932 by King Solomon Hill. The record was long considered lost, but one copy was located by John Tefteller in 2002.

Geoff Muldaur refers to Jefferson with the song "Got To Find Blind Lemon" on the album The Secret Handshake.

Art Evans portrays Blind Lemon in the 1976 film Leadbelly directed by Gordon Parks.

Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds recorded the song "Blind Lemon Jefferson" on the album The Firstborn Is Dead.

The 2010 video game Fallout: New Vegas, in one of its many downloadable add-ons ('Old World Blues'), features an AI juke-box by the name of 'Blind Diode Jefferson'. The AI claims to have once been a 'blues musician' before his music hard-drives were stripped from him. Voicing of the AI can be characterized as a Southern drawl homage to Blind Lemon Jefferson.

In the 2003 movie Masked and Anonymous, Bobby Cupid (Luke Wilson) gives his friend Jack Fate (Bob Dylan) Blind Lemon's original guitar, on which he claims "Matchbox Blues" was first recorded.

Cheech and Chong parodied Jefferson as "Blind Melon Chitlin'" on their self-titled 1971 album Cheech and Chong, on their 1985 album Get Out of My Room, and in a stage routine that can be seen in their 1983 film Still Smokin'.

Chet Atkins calls Jefferson "one of my first finger-picking influences" in the song "Nine Pound Hammer", on the album *The Atkins - Travis Traveling Show*.

A practical joke played on *Down Beat* magazine editor Gene Lees in the late 1950s took on a life of its own and became a long-running hoax when one of his correspondents included a reference to blues legend "Blind Orange Adams" in an article and it was inadvertently published in the magazine. "Blind Orange Adams" is obviously a parody on the name "Blind Lemon Jefferson". References to the non-existent Adams appeared in numerous articles in *Down Beat* over the next few years.

American drama film *Black Snake Moan* was named after one of his only songs recorded with Okeh Records.