

Chapter 9

Eco-ability: The Complex Embodiment of Blind Lemon**Jefferson**

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Blind Lemon Jefferson and Eco-Ability

Blind Lemon Jefferson was the blues. He played the blues. He traveled like a bluesman, and he was blind, a stereotypical signifier of a blues musician. But more than any of those things, Jefferson played the slide-guitar with a tenderness that matched the sad, strained voice that made him an American music icon. Jefferson first recorded in 1925 at the height of America's Jazz Age. Beginning with Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds' 1920 hit "Crazy Blues," jazz and blues defined American music for the next two decades. Bessie Smith's 1923 contract with Columbia Records, and Ma Rainey's title as "Mother of the Blues" signified the enormous financial potential of the "blues," whether the acoustic guitar-country blues or the jazzy classic blues. Record companies soon noticed the demand for African American blues records—specifically for Black consumers—and created the genre of ethnic music, otherwise known as Race Records, to rival the commercial success of African American women vaudeville singers. Gramophone owners and emerging record executives recognized the potential of reproducing Black music for a mass audience. The female-dominated classic blues needed

a rival, and they found it in the male acoustic-driven country blues.

The “race record” industry called the country blues, the “downhome blues,” and found a ready consumer market in both the South and the North following the Great Migration into cities like New York and Chicago. The nostalgia of the past drove many of these Southern migrants to buy blues records. This trend lasted for over a decade and firmly established the race record genre in American popular culture. Blind Lemon Jefferson proved to be key to this success by navigating the color line and making the best of his segregated environment to become the first country blues singer to find national fame in both the South and North. It was the ability to navigate the environment, his eco-ability, that proved to be his success.

Jefferson used his environment to his advantage, whether this environment was physical, social, geographical, or emotional. Physically, Jefferson was born blind. He used his blindness as a stage-name and a performance trope. Socially, his disability was deemed harmless; thus, he could cross lines of segregation because he did not present a threat to the status quo. Geographically, he used his upbringing as a sharecropper in the South for lyrical topics. Emotionally, he pulled on the heartstrings of listeners with his songs of poverty and woe. All of these traits, in turn, appealed to fellow Southerners, as well as Northern migrants nostalgic for home. Finally, his use of eco-ability allowed him a cathartic release to the constraints of Jim Crow restrictions and to the perceived limitations of his blindness. Together, Jefferson used various forms of his environment to make a career and a meaningful life in an era during which he was oppressed both physically and socially. More importantly, opening up avenues for a more fulsome

examination of disabled people's lives showed the possibility of dynamic responses to oppression as well as their potential to use their social environment to survive and thrive. This is eco-ability.

Three interdependent developments, "the Great War, dynamic growth in the agricultural and industrial sectors, and mass migration to cities," contributed to a social change in the country, particularly among urban African Americans.¹ The intersections of race and disability impacted the environment Jefferson survived, and at the same time, thrived. Jefferson challenged notions of ability and crossed the color line to achieve both musical success and social protest. For Jefferson, these changes began in the rural South during the early 20th century. The gravel and dirt roads that singers walked, drove, or hitch-hiked were now paved, reducing travel time considerably, and connected rural Southerners to the rest of America for the first time. Railroad tracks crisscrossed the South, heaving up train depots in just about every town they passed. Travel became synonymous with blues musicians. Both the landscape and the social spaces of the rural South were changing and becoming increasingly connected with the rest of the country, despite the traditional history that the rural South was unchanging. The Black press included articles on downhome blues musicians next to jazz profiles, and the American consumer age had emerged.

The popularity of the country blues took off with the success of race records from artists like Blind Lemon Jefferson in 1926. In some ways, race records conformed to the

¹ R.A. Lawson. *Jim Crow's Counterculture: The Blues and Black Southerners* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 130.

segregated and racist nature of the country and its long tradition of colonialism by taking Black music and creating a national market for it among White consumers. Throughout the 1920s blues musicians began to perform both religious and secular songs in bars, street corners and train depots. The rail and the road led to the big city, connecting the country as never before. The nature of travel was changing, and so was the music. In the church, gospel and "spirituals lose favor to singing" out of the modern hymnals, and "city-born blues and jive take over the jook-joints."² Blues musicians played what the various audiences wanted to hear—the pop songs of the day. The popularity of Jefferson and his contemporaries followed their success north into the industrial cities, as they sang songs about life and reworked old spirituals.

Jefferson's first recording on Paramount records, "I Want to Be Like Jesus in my Heart," marked him as one of the first male blues musicians to make a substantial impact as a singer and guitarist. His second recording, the secular "Got the Blues" was the first best-selling blues single by a black male singer, and earned him the title "King of the Country Blues." Blues biographer Giles Oakley even referred to Jefferson as the "archetype of all bluesmen," as record labels tried to copy his success by recruiting dozens of country-blues musicians to northern cities. Jefferson has also been credited with being the first "downhome blues singer" to enjoy commercial success marking the race record genre just as financially viable as vaudeville and jazz records. Over the next three years, Jefferson became the leading recording artist for Paramount Records, who advertised his

² Sterling A. Brown. "Negro Folk Expressions: Spirituals, Seculars, Ballads, and Work Songs," *Phylon*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1953), 60.

songs like "Booster Blues" as "real, old-fashioned blues by a real old-fashioned blues player." Paramount released nearly one hundred sides a day in 1926. Eventually, the race record genre outsold vaudeville and jazz releases, marking the 1920s and 1930s as the race record era. The commercial success of the country blues motivated record companies to travel south with portable recording equipment, or to invite southern singers to northern studios on the new system of railroads and highways. Jefferson came north to play music on his own in 1925. He was one of the first artists signed by Paramount Records in 1926 and one of their most successful artists of all time. Jefferson was inducted into the inaugural class of the Blues Hall of Fame nearly a half a century after his death in 1929. His life was short, but his music made an indelible mark on the future of American music.

Race Records and the Country Blues

Jefferson was one of the first male country blues musicians to achieve commercial success in the North and South. The few existing sources of his life and career capture the life of an African American musician who came from nothing and made a career out of music. Music also allowed Jefferson to engage in alternative forms of political participation and countercultural escape despite the segregated music industry. Integral to the popularity of blues music during the early 20th century was the expanding American music marketplace. "Mass culture," Lizabeth Cohen writes, "offered blacks the

ingredients from which to construct a new, urban black culture."³ Yet, mass culture was not just northern, or urban. In the 1920s, Black Americans increasingly participated in a consumption-driven culture of race records whether they "resided in Chicago's South Side or Mississippi's Delta region."⁴ This widespread reach also allowed African American musicians to gain greater independence and influence through cultural forms. Throughout the 1920s, as Jefferson wandered across the dusty east Texas fields in search of barrel houses or caught the trains north to Chicago, the race record commercial genre had begun to emerge. The quick rise of the race record industry during the Roaring Twenties made it a breakout decade for many musical artists. This popularity carried over to the Great Depression era when an estimated 5,500 blues recordings were made by about 1,200 different artists, all classified as race records.⁵

Blues music became a market force. Its sudden success reveals the complex development of race in American music. How Black musicians navigated the segregated world of music and society, while being revered for their talents but separated by the color of their skin, helps explain how a bluesman like Jefferson balanced on the color line. The race record industry, for example, employed African American plantation stereotypes, revealing some of the social anxiety surrounding the increasing number of Black migrants in the North. As Black migrants moved north, they held onto the past because it was where many family members still lived. Whites, noticing the rising population of African

³ Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 147-148.

⁴ Lawson, 131.

⁵ *Ibid*, 129.

Americans in northern cities, expressed their uneasiness through their desire for the way things used to be, equally nostalgic for the past. Both began buying blues records in large numbers. The commercial market associated with the phonograph and the radio were two momentous innovations and played an instrumental role in the rise of blues. Together, they propagated a distinct African American culture through music.

By 1926 blues records were selling between five and six million albums annually, and by 1941 over thirty million were sold each year.⁶ During the mid-1930s college-age record collectors were targeted by record labels like Decca Records, who announced that the “new customers were responsible,” specifically naming White college students and women.⁷ Race records were so popular that White artists began to mimic Black jazz and blues music.⁸

Advertisements for blues records appeared by the hundreds in the nation’s foremost Black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, during the 1920s. The *Defender’s* record advertising recalled the South as home, enticing readers to participate in that memory, despite the racial stereotypes used to sell the music. The *Defender’s* ads for country blues featured artists accompanied with guitars, banjos, and harmonicas. These ads characterized the men as lonely wayfarers journeying to and from the South. Jefferson was portrayed as an old man alone on Christmas Eve in the city, a convict

⁶ Lawson, 130-131; Robert Kraft *Stage to the Studio: Musicians and the Sound Revolution, 1890-1950* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 59-97.

⁷ William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 172.

⁸ Blind Lemon Jefferson, “Matchbox Blues,” Sundayblues.org (accessed September 1, 2021).

strapped into the electric chair, and a drifting hobo asleep on the scaffolding beneath a freight car. Such images portrayed the destitute environment musicians and disabled were forced to live in. Likewise, many Southern migrants knew something about moving far away. The lyrics and advertisements of race records helped forge a bond among Black readers by presenting the South as shared memory.⁹

An advertisement for Jefferson's song "Matchbox Blues" captures the Southern stereotypes of the shotgun house, mule-drawn wagon, and the imperious Black matriarch. The title of the song, along with the image of the mule-drawn wagon, suggests travel, but with only a suitcase to make the long journey. The image may have been stereotypical, but it was also nostalgic for those already living in northern cities. Jefferson's music then provides the link to the past and the present. Jazz producers already knew the popularity of Black music in the North among White listeners, and race record companies cashed in on their use of downhome stereotypes by marketing them to Southerners, and more specifically, African American migrants in the North. Poverty—moreover, the desire to escape the environment of poverty—drove the migrants. Some musicians were able to capture this longing in their music and lyrics, endearing them to listeners.

One advertisement for Jefferson's "Sunshine Special" captures Northern migrants' sense of respectability as seen in their outfits. From the ad's text it is clear that blindness is part of the advertisement, but still allows Jefferson respectability through his suit and

⁹ Mark K. Dolan, "Extra! Chicago *Defender* Race Record Ads Show South from Afar," *Southern Cultures*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Fall 2007), 107.

tie photograph. He may have been from the South, but he was still cultured. This depiction is a marked contrast from the image of Jefferson with his rope-string guitar and downhome music. While these advertisements drove excitement about migrating north, it also captures the desire for suitable employment. Again, this publicity captures the environment of poverty, yet Jefferson's "Rambler Blues" advertisement shows the lack of work in the South along with the danger of hoboing, something a traveling musician and a blind laborer knew well.¹⁰

Jefferson's music was popular in the North and South alike. His second blues release in 1926, "Long Lonesome Blues," was the first best-selling country blues record. "Long Lonesome Blues" captures the unique way Jefferson merges rhythm and melody to create the essence of an entire band. While Jefferson is well known for his ability to mimic ragtime rhythms with his guitar work, it was his voice that first struck listeners. His vocal range was unparalleled. When he hit the upper registers, the listener could almost feel the heartbreak in his voice. In the same song he could mimic the howl of a bloodhound, the chug of the railroad trains, or the cry of an angry lover. A friend of Jefferson, Quince Cox, remembered some of his train platform performances: "He could play anything...You hear one of them around a wolf or possum or a coon or something on the track, he could do that good, too...he'd squeal just like a dog. Make it sound good, too."¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Alan B. Govenar and Jay F. Brakefield, *Deep Ellum: The Other Side of Dallas* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2013), 81.

Besides his broad vocal range, Jefferson may be best known for his ability to cover any genre of music. This versatility made his records immediate hits. The effect of Jefferson's success spread the popularity of the guitar-driven blues across the South. "Wasn't nobody else playin' what he played," guitarist Thomas Shaw remembered, adding, "he could play anything you asked him to play."¹² Jefferson shrewdly skirted the line of race and popular music in order to perform a unique set based on particular demographics. This kind of tailoring brought him into proximity with many genres of music, from blues to hillbilly and anything in between. By 1926 Jefferson was recording a variety of music, and more significantly, crossing the music color line.

In the 1920s, blues, swing, and jazz sold well in African American and White markets, and for the first time Black music, as Amiri Baraka has acknowledged, was crossing the color line.¹³ Lawson suggests that the advent of the recording industry allowed blues musicians to sing "their stories for the audience of southern black workers—cash-strapped, voteless sharecroppers, stevedores, domestics, levee-camp workers, and loggers."¹⁴ The musical and lyrical creations of Black music reflected divisions within American society and offered a countercultural voice for African Americans. Yet, what makes the blues even more significant is how it came to be accepted by other races as

¹² Alan B. Govenar. "Blind Lemon Jefferson: The Myth and the Man," *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2000), 8.

¹³ Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music that Developed from It* (New York: Morrow Paperback, 1963), 87.

¹⁴ Lawson, 1.

well. In this way, the recording studio "permitted indirect exchange" of Black music and culture through "chain stores, local distributors and mail order houses."¹⁵ The country was strictly segregated, but musicians were beginning to break down the color barrier in music.

Bluesmen and women performed in towns and countrysides from the Carolinas to the heart of Texas. Some of these musicians had been playing for years, yet this era marked the first time their music had been recorded and therefore was available throughout the country and eventually the world. Jefferson's songs like "Got the Blues" caught the attention of Black and White musicians alike and were covered or copied for generations. Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter and folklorist John Lomax carried Jefferson's songs into the northeastern cities and drew the rapt attention of White audiences at the Modern Language Association (MLA) conference in 1934. Attendees believed they were listening to the "uncontaminated, original music" of African American folk songs, another lasting impact of American musical colonialism.¹⁶ It was the first time the all-White MLA membership had heard the country blues. Jefferson opened that door, and more than a few blues artists copied his style. "Everybody else was standin' around him, hopin' they could do what he could do," Shaw remarked. "Whenever he pull his guitar out, he was

¹⁵ John S. Otto and Augustus M. Burns, "Black and White Cultural Interaction in the Early Twentieth-Century South: Race and Hillbilly Music," *Phylon*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (1974), 414.

¹⁶ *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 49, Supplement (1934).

the king there."¹⁷ The years after Jefferson's Paramount Recordings marked a golden age for the country blues.

Couchman

The environment of Couchman, Texas, led Jefferson to write "Matchbook Blues" in 1926. There were many times Jefferson felt like the subject from "Matchbook Blues," often part of everyday Black life. Part of Jefferson's presentation involved playing on audiences' empathy for the plight of African Americans and the disabled. It was also something he knew intimately. Nearly half of his songs relate to the disenfranchised and downtrodden, such as "Bad Luck Blues":

I wanna go home and I ain't got sufficient clothes
 Doggone my bad luck soul
 Wanna go home and I ain't got sufficient clothes
 I mean sufficient, talking about clothes
 Well, I wanna go home, but I ain't got sufficient clothes

I bet my money and I lost it, Lord, it's so
 Doggone my bad luck soul
 Mm, lost it, ain't it so?
 I mean lost it, speakin' about so, now
 I'll never bet on the deuce-trey-queen no more...

I'm gonna run 'cross town, catch that southbound Santa Fe
 Doggone my bad luck soul
 Mm, Lord, that Santa Fe
 I mean the Santy, speakin' about Fe

Be on my way to what they call lovin' Tennessee.

¹⁷ David Evans, "Musical Innovation in the Blues of Blind Lemon Jefferson," *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2000), 107-108.

Kathryn Ervin Jefferson, a distant relative of Lemon, praised him as a “great songster” who “came up the hard way.” She listened to him play near the old cotton gin in Wortham Flat, Texas. At this point Jefferson was still a teenager, yet he already knew where to perform, outside the working-class warehouses and cotton engines, as well as what songs to play, the pop songs of the day. The fact that Cox recalls young Lemon performing *inside* the business district of Wortham displays his ability to cross racial divides. Jefferson was so talented that kids, White and Black alike, followed him around just to listen to him play. Mattie Barree Dancer remembered she was “crazy about Blind Lemon” and her older sister Bessie, “claimed to be in love with Lemon.” Jefferson was not the only guitar performer in town, yet he is the only one still remembered. Dancer recalled that he often sang “Going to Chicago.” It is clear he was transcendent on guitar from a young age and knew he was bound for bigger things. Many blues musicians learned musical techniques at home from their mothers and aunts. It is unclear if this was also the case for a young Jefferson. What is clear is that Jefferson traveled to perform from a young age, just as nearly all country blues musicians had done growing up. Not only would he travel to Chicago in the near future, but his country blues would become a hit all the way north in the Windy City.¹⁸

Kathryn Jefferson called her relative a “great songster” because he played a variety of genres. He performed ragtime in traveling vaudeville shows, hillbilly music for White working-class laborers outside the cotton warehouses, and string band accompaniment

¹⁸ See Robert Uzzel, *Blind Lemon Jefferson: His Life, His Death, and His Legacy* (Fort Worth: Eakin Press, 2002).

throughout Texas. Jefferson performed on the nearby streets of Grosebeck, Marlin, and Kosse. In Buffalo, Texas, he met a young Sam Lightnin' Hopkins, who went on to cover many of Jefferson's songs. Jefferson often reprimanded his playing exclaiming, "Boy, you got to play it right." By his late teens Jefferson was a songster, performing a variety of music in everything from juke joints to farm parties and sometimes even church picnics. By his twentieth birthday he had performed at medicine and circus shows, Juneteenth celebrations, tent revivals, and sporting events. He even tailored popular songs to ragtime so he could perform dance measures popular in New York City and Chicago, like the Black Bottom and the Charleston. This breadth shows that Harlem Renaissance cultural forms were not confined to Harlem or to the North in general. Black culture was being performed and consumed from the North to the South.

Before long, Jefferson was one of the most popular entertainers in Central Texas with original songs like "Mosquito Moan," a complaint against the common farm pest, and "Rising High Water Blues" about the prevalence of natural disasters in the flat Texas fields. Other songs commented on Black poverty and oppression. Many songs centered on labor and the prison system.¹⁹ "Hangman's Blues," "Prison Cell Blues," "Penitentiary Blues," and "Lectric Chair Blues" all depict the injustice of the criminal justice system in Texas. Jefferson's friend Arthur Carter stated that while Lemon was always a "joker," he believed strongly in "treating people right," and complained when society did not treat them justly. Nearly all of his topical songs reflect this sense of fairness:

While a mean ol' hangman is waitin' to tighten up that noose

¹⁹ W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1969), 151-152.

Oh, the mean ol' hangman is waitin' to tighten up that noose
 Lord, I'm so scared, I'm trembling in my shoes
 Jury heard my case and they said my hand was red
 Judge heard my case and said my hand was red
 And judge, he sentenced me, be hanging 'til I'm dead

Dallas

After World War I, Jefferson left the dusty country towns of Coachman and Wortham behind to find more profitable work in Dallas. In 1900 the Black population of Dallas was less than 10,000, but after WWI it more than doubled. Jefferson remained a musician, but needed work and relocated to Dallas. Even though there were plenty of jobs, his blindness kept him from many of them. The African American entertainment section of Dallas was called Deep Ellum, an area of Elm Street north and east of the downtown district. Here, at Elm Street and Central Avenue was the Central Track railroad stop, where day laborers were taken out to the cotton fields of Collin County and the constant flow of migrants looking for work arrived hourly. Deep Ellum was, according to Jefferson's biographer, "marked by clusters of pawnshops, tailors, second hand clothing stores, shoeshine parlors, cafes, and sporting houses."²⁰ This description neglects to mention the many working-class bars that also doubled as African American banks. Jefferson knew the bars held the cash from paychecks, along with the men looking to spend it. Referring to the blues singers on Central Track, "Crowds would cluster round them," Paul Oliver described, commenting on how "the coins would clatter—nickels and dimes—in their hats and tin cups."²¹ Along with the Central Track railroad platform,

²⁰ Uzzel, 21.

²¹ Paul Oliver, *The Story of the Blues* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 2.

Jefferson found the two best places to perform in Deep Ellum.

"Match Box Blues" captures a number of Jefferson's characteristics: his penchant for travel, the constant search for work, but also his ability to move around the country like any other Black man.

I'm sitting here wonderin'
will a matchbox hold my clothes?
I ain't got so many matches,
but I got so far to go.

These lyrics capture the eco-ability of being a blues musician. The fact that even a tiny matchbox is too large to hold his goods was not lost on the listener. A matchbox holds nothing but matches, not the cigarettes, just matches to bum a cigarette from a passerby. This song mocks such abject positions many people faced when traveling to find work, without even a cigarette to light, let alone a suitcase to hold clothes. Lawrence Levine believes the theme of using comedy to describe serious disadvantages was common in Black music: "The use of black song as a vehicle for the expression of trouble and woe...was modified by a characteristic optimism which was based upon the strong sense of imminent change that pervaded black thought."²² The occupation of a traveling songster was a ray of hope for a disadvantaged, impaired Black man. Jefferson spoke openly about his blindness and the lack of employment opportunities it entitled, hoping the matchbox suitcase was only temporary.

Dallas was the place to be for a Texas bluesman. Together, Jefferson and Ledbetter performed the popular songs of the day or topical songs about traveling and

²² Lawrence W. Levine. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 261.

work heard in "Silver City Bound," or songs about current events such as "The Titanic." Lead Belly would memorialize his time in Dallas with the song "Blind Lemon Blues," which John Lomax recorded for the Library of Congress six years after Jefferson's death:

She sit down an' tol' her little boy,
His wife says, I want son to play the piano a piece.
Since you been gone so long,
Let him know what he's done learned.
Since you been gone.

And the little boy sit down, begin to play,
His little piano a piece.

The move north from Dallas to Chicago was a momentous decision, but for Jefferson it would pay off. Besides Dallas, Jefferson traveled as far as Houston to perform. He frequently performed with White hillbilly and string-bands like Hobart Smith and Clarence Ashley's Blue Ridge Band, showing that music was performed and consumed by Black and White alike. Like the mobility of African Americans and the disabled, the segregation of music was often crossed. Yet, he was still struggling to make ends meet. Like many other Texan African Americans, Jefferson attempted to supplement his music income with manual labor jobs such as cotton farming or warehouse packing. Yet, manual labor was hard to come by. His blindness was a deterrent for employers, as some jobs required sight, and the stigma of the invalid handicapped was strong. Instead, Jefferson turned to other sources of income. For a summer he was a novice wrestler, traveling throughout central Texas to perform. Even here, the novelty of a disabled wrestler

attracted audiences to the arenas where he was billed as the "Blind Wrestler."²³ Jefferson as a wrestler shows the dearth of available jobs for disabled Americans, but wrestling was also a form of escape from the realities of poverty.

Like wrestling, "The blues," Lawson writes, "were conceived, inherited, and reshaped by aspiring professional musicians who saw music as a countercultural escape from economic and social subservience."²⁴ Jefferson also knew what forms of economic ability to use to make a successful living such as performing as a wrestler when it presented a promising financial opportunity. African American musicians like Jefferson did not sit idly by as vassals of White control, but used their music to define themselves and share their struggle. Many Black performers saw themselves as messengers of a counterculture that threatened the dominant White power structure. Black musicians masked their lyrics in order to employ what Du Bois labeled double-consciousness: "One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings."²⁵ African American musicians used both sides of the color line to achieve success, which also showcased opposing identities. Their double-consciousness allowed for a Black consciousness that was not apolitical or infantile, but socially charged. Lawson suggests interpreting the blues as counterculture allows modern evaluators "to understand that blues musicians were necessarily accepting of prevailing Jim Crow social norms while at

²³ Antoinette Mitchell, "Blind Lemon Jefferson: The Blind Composer," *Mexia Daily News*, December 18, 1976, 1.

²⁴ Lawson, xi.

²⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover, 1994), 2.

the same time hoping to evade or subvert them."²⁶ Paul Gilroy writes musicians derived "their special power derives from a doubleness, their unsteady location simultaneously inside and outside the conventions, assumptions, and aesthetic rules which distinguish and periodise modernity."²⁷ The modern blues musician's lyrics also countered traditional African American stereotypes. Sometimes Black consciousness was seen in protest, rather than the subservient representation constructed by folklorists and the record industry. Double consciousness was the counterculture of African Americans, and in this case, the hidden transcripts of blues music.

Some African Americans supplemented their incomes or even made a career out of music. Yet, odd jobs, such as music performances, wrestling, or bootlegging were still hard to come by—they had to possess a certain skill. Jefferson's hook was his blindness. Like the novelty of a blind street musician, a blind wrestler merged entertainment with bloodsport and afforded him a side job others would not have even been considered for. Jefferson may have simply been taking a job where a job was possible, but his blindness allowed access where others were overlooked. These types of jobs were not only potential areas for disenfranchised African Americans to work, but were often the only jobs open to disabled Americans. And a steady job was a sign of respectability.

One sign of respectability, particularly among African Americans, and perhaps more so, the disabled, was clothing. Once Jefferson considered himself a successful musician, he sought out Deep Ellum's finest couturier, Model Tailors. According to Isaac

²⁶ Lawson, 17.

²⁷ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 73.

Goldstein, son of the owner of Model Tailors, "They [Deep Ellum customers] had to have...good slides...a good hat and a Model Tailors suit."²⁸ So, in the spring of 1925, when record salesman R.T. Ashford sent Chicago's Paramount Records talent scout J. Mayo Williams a copy of a scratchy Blind Lemon recording, Jefferson's career as a professional musician began; the first thing he did was head to Model Tailors.

It was Jefferson's immediate popularity in Chicago, as well as the OKeh Records Artists' Night, that captured the nascent popularity of guitar-driven blues in northern cities, thereby obliterating the myth that the blues was rural. Music culture was fluid, moving north and south with the various waves of migrants. Likewise, Levine perpetuates such a myth, writing that the "hybrid blues of the female Classic Blues singers were supplemented by the more traditional sounds of a steady stream of bluesmen whose regional styles were given wide exposure for the first time."²⁹ Of the two known Jefferson photographs he is wearing a suit and tie in both—common stock photos of blues recording artists.

Musician Victoria Spivey may agree, stating the suit and tie was the way Jefferson usually carried himself. Jefferson and his contemporaries were songsters, meaning they played what the audience wanted to hear, whether moaning to a slide-guitar, plucking along to a classic ragtime tune, or accompanying a female vocalist complete with a horn section. Spivey recalls that together they "got so good that the landladies would try to

²⁸ Uzzel, 29.

²⁹ Levine, 228.

hire both of us at the same time. We did it when we could and loved it."³⁰ By the time of the golden age of blues, Jefferson, among hundreds of others, traveled back and forth from sultry juke-joints in the South to the windy back alleys of Chicago performing for sizable audiences in northern cities and southern towns alike playing popular songs to pay the bills. Once again, it was Jefferson's ability to perform in the best places that allowed him to pay the bills. Jefferson then took these talents to Paramount Records.

Chicago

By the winter of 1925 Jefferson had left a muddy Dallas for a snowy Chicago. In Chicago he was the "first downhome blues singer to enjoy commercial success." For Paramount Records, he marked the future success of the segregated race records genre. For Jefferson, this move was the beginning of his career and the end of his life. Jefferson legitimized the country blues in the northern cities, thereby shattering the myth of regional music divisions. It was the routes of music that mattered more than the roots of music. Even after this migration, folklorist John Lomax scoured the rural South in search of authentic Black folk music. There was no such thing. Everybody in Chicago listened to the country blues; Jefferson was just the first to make money for the recording industry.

At the turn of the 20th century Chicago was the fastest growing city in the United States. Much of this growth was created by African Americans moving north for employment. In 1860 fewer than eight percent of African Americans lived outside of the

³⁰ Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 95.

South; by 1930 the number had risen to twenty-two percent.³¹ Yet, while employment may have been a major factor, Black people were fleeing the South to escape a variety of factors. The next great wave of Black migrants more than doubled the population of Chicago. Industrial jobs were the catalyst for men during WWI. The prevalence of Jim Crow in every aspect of their lives may have been the ultimate motivation to move north after the Great War. One advocate for migration was the city's leading Black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*. The circulation of the *Defender* was evidence of this growth. It reached only a few thousand in 1910, but 282,571 by 1920. Between 1916 and 1920, the Black population of Chicago more than doubled to 109,000.³² Jefferson's song "Broke and Hungry" captures why all these people were moving north and looking for an entirely new life:

I'm broke and hungry,
Ragged and dirty too.
I said I'm broke and hungry,
Ragged and dirty too.
Mama, if I clean up,
Can I go home with you?

These new residents were looking for entertainment after the stress of a long move and a new environment. The country blues was both a comfort to new residents and a hope for a better future. This dual effect can be seen in Jefferson himself, who held onto the memory of a Southern home and yearned for the beginning of a fresh start. Jefferson's

³¹ Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *To Ask for an Equal Chance: African Americans in the Great Depression* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 8.

³² William Barlow, *Looking Up at Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 288-289.

lyrics capture both the prospect of a good job in the North, as well as the nostalgia for his Southern hometown. In Jefferson's "Rambler Blues" he shows how migrating north was not an easy choice, nor was it without heartache. Many migrants left loved ones behind and longed to be back down south with them again. Yet, Jefferson also shows how necessity drove many African Americans north in search of better opportunities and lifestyles, as he sings about someone he left behind as not "free." The song conveys how sometimes one must leave the past behind for a better future, even if that means the loss of home and loved ones:

When I left my home, I left my baby cryin'
She keeps me worried and bothered in the mind.
Now, don't your house look lonesome, when your baby
Pack up and leave
Now, don't your house look lonesome, when your baby
Pack up and leave
You may drink your moonshine, but, baby, your heart
Ain't free.

One related theme that is synonymous with the blind blues musician is that of the itinerant wanderer in the image of riding the rail or hiking the gravel roads. Along those roads and depots the wanderer finds the crossroads. While freedom of movement was one of the few autonomous choices African Americans could make, this decision came with consequences. Picking up one's entire life to move hundreds of miles across the country was a significant life choice, and the crossroads represented a place of decision making. It is the itinerant wanderer that most often comes to these crossroads with little direction, a few cents, and fingers full of musical talent, hoping to find a new path to follow. Since the motif of the crossroads symbolizes difficult life decisions, it is only fitting that the traveling blues musician would adopt the theme while spending much of his life

on the road. Musician Mance Lipscomb explains just this concept, as Blind Lemon "hung out round on the track, down on Deep Ellum...from nine-thirty until six o'clock that evening. Then it gittin dawd an he git somebody to carry im home."³³ Life on the road meant living on the road. It became home to the blues musician. It was Jefferson's ability to navigate the environment, or his eco-ability, that provided opportunities.

The road and its intersections held a power for blues musicians. Jefferson paints a picture of escape, love, and happiness in his "Shuckin' Sugar Blues:"

I've got your picture, and I'm going to put it in a frame
I've got your picture, I'll put it in a frame, Shuckin' Sugar
And then if you leave town, we can find you just the same.

In "Sunshine Special" his attitude seems much less optimistic:

Gonna leave on the Sunshine Special, goin' in on the Santé Fe.
Don't say nothin' about that Katy, because it's taken my brown from me.

The road held both its positive vibes as well as its downsides. The road is free, but with freedom comes choice and many choices lead down paths unforeseen. It is only once the crossroads have been reached that the decision is put to the test. Jefferson's lyrics painted a picture of African Americans moving north, along with the emotions and decisions facing this migration. The crossroads are a recurring theme in Black tradition, representing not only the past and decisions about the future, but also the frightful days of the Middle Passage, to the Underground Railroad and the days of slavery, to Reconstruction-era Western migrations. The traveling musician represents these hard choices. Traveling the rail and the road, these musicians were crossing borders.

³³ Govenar, "Blind Lemon Jefferson." 10.

In the early 20th century these musicians may not have been running from slave drivers, but they were running from something similar. They were running from sharecropping, from plantations, and from the lack of jobs and racism in the South. The idea of making a living playing music, rather than toiling in the fields, must have held quite an allure. For the first time in their lives these musicians were free to make their own decisions. The road was not simply a ticket out of the past, but also, possibly for the first time, a chance to make their own judgments and decisions.

Jefferson, though, already had a promising job in 1925 in commercial music. His success recording the country blues with Paramount Records became the model for record companies. That spring, Paramount Records, along with a number of other recording companies, "sent portable field equipment to southern cities or invited southern singers to their home studios in the North."³⁴ While the classic blues of Bessie Smith was already immensely popular, they relied on professional songwriters and jazz accompaniments. This kind of production cost money and required a variety of musicians. Country blues, on the other hand, could be recorded outside a singer's home or right on the street, even in prisons where Lomax "discovered" Lead Belly. The country blues were easy to record, and Jefferson was more than willing to participate.

Jefferson recorded seventy-nine singles for Paramount Records from 1925 to 1929. Songs like "Dry Southern Blues," "Corinna Blues," and "Long Lonesome Blues" were hits that were covered by his contemporaries. "Wartime Blues" and "Broke and Hungry" commented on social issues. "Matchbook Blues" and "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean"

³⁴ Uzzel, 31.

made Jefferson a modern classic. "Wartime Blues" presents a unique perspective of being blind during an international conflict by showing both the heartache of deployment and the emasculation of the inability to serve in the war because of a disability.

What you gonna do when they send your man to the war?
 What you gonna do, send your man to the war?
 What you gonna do when they send your man to the war?
 I'm gonna drink muddy water, gonna sleep in a hollow log.

Ain't got nobody, I'm all here by myself
 Got nobody, all here by myself
 Got nobody, all here by myself
 Well, these women don't care but the men don't need me here.

Between recording sessions at Paramount, Jefferson was popular in the Black Chicago communities. He performed on the streets, on the "L," and was hired to play in nightclubs and private socials. While Oliver declares the Paramount recordings of Jefferson as a "remarkable series of recordings which preserve the blues in its folk form at the point of transition from the field holler to the street corner and the barroom floor," Jefferson was simply recording what Paramount wanted to hear, the downhome blues. In the nightclubs he performed ragtime or reworked his own blues songs to fit the popular dances of 1920s Chicago, just as he did in the dusty barrooms of Deep Ellum. Just as he moved north to south, so too did the styles of blues music.

Paramount Records' publication of the *Paramount Book of Blues* used the stereotypical colonial image of the country blues as southern African Americans "singing weird, sad melodies at their work and play, and unconsciously he [Jefferson] began to imitate them—lamenting his fate in song," and Jefferson's blindness was a "heart-rending fate." Here, the oppressed plight of both African Americans and the disabled are

combined by Paramount Records to create the ultimate image of destitution. But, it also maintained the myth of the blues. Music scholar Jeff Todd Titon believes the insincere depictions of African Americans in race record advertisements were maintained because record labels were comfortable with illustrations of “downhome black people.”³⁵ It is more likely though that White store owners selling race records were more comfortable with the image of downhome African Americans. Even the *Chicago Defender* expressed Jefferson’s music was “real old-fashioned blues by a real old-fashioned blues singer [who] plays the guitar in a real southern style.”³⁶ The image of a disabled *and* downhome African American did not frighten White listeners and advertised nostalgia for Black listeners. White listeners were also drawn to this nostalgia. Paramount Records and the *Defender* knew this performance was all a farce. Jefferson knew it was all a farce. The artist Blind Lemon Jefferson, though, made it part of his act. And his records sold.

Scholars have since unpacked the racist stereotypes used in popular cultural forms in the history of the country. Some have shown how the oppressed artists used such stereotypes to achieve social gain. Titon writes that the advertising illustrations of downhome blues songs placed “the plantation stereotype more firmly...As for the city black, he was invited, by the jive talk, to laugh at his country cousin.” He continues, stating the listener was “supposed to laugh at the predicament of the character whose troubles he sang about.”³⁷ Jefferson illustrated another archetype of the oppressed, the

³⁵ Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 204.

³⁶ Uzzel, 38.

³⁷ Titon, 254.

disabled. He merged both forms, or at least abided by the decisions of Paramount Records, to advertise both his race and disability. What is more, these advertisements were intended for both urban and rural consumers, in the North or South, through local retailers. Therefore, the notion that the blues was southern, or rural, was also part of the advertisement that Jefferson portrayed. Jefferson, though, used eco-ability to navigate race and disability to achieve a modicum of musical success.

Conclusion

By 1929 the *Chicago Defender* had labeled Jefferson the King of the Country Blues. Only a couple months after the Stock Market Crash that would also mark the end of the race record genre and nearly the recording industry altogether, Jefferson disappeared into a Chicago snowstorm and never returned. In December, Jefferson's life came to a sudden end. Just like his life, his death is shrouded in myth. The details of his death have long been debated, although most accounts agree he died on the South Side streets of Chicago in December 1929. Jazz historian John Steiner said Jefferson left Paramount studios in the late afternoon to play at a house party and was found dead in the street early the next morning, "with snow drifting over his body." His producer, Arthur Laibly, believed he had a heart attack while waiting on his driver. But this cause suggests his driver either left him behind or never came to pick him up. Jefferson's old manager, Mayo Williams, claims the singer "collapsed in his car and was abandoned by his chauffeur." Some argue Jefferson died from more nefarious means. Mance Lipscomb argues he was beaten, robbed, and left to die in the street, while Mattie Dancer states she heard he was

shot during a performance. Others suggest he had simply left the house party and got lost in the streets during the blizzard. the *Chicago Defender* proclaimed it was "Chicago's worst snowstorm" in a series of particularly snowy weather in the windy city that winter.³⁸ Some, like Son House and Charley Patton, claim even to have played with him years after his death.³⁹

Paramount Records sent Jefferson's body back to Texas, where he was buried in the frozen ground on New Year's Day, 1930, at Smith Chapel Primitive Baptist Church No. 1: "Two or three hundred people came to the funeral, black and white, to watch his coffin lowered into the ground." In March, blues singer John Byrd recorded a single titled "Wasn't It Sad About Lemon." The flip-side of this record was a sermon by Rev. Emmett Dickinson entitled "Death of Blind Lemon."⁴⁰

What makes one look past Jefferson's ability and ingenuity is an oft-repeated aspect, often associated with blues singers: blindness. Like the story of soul-selling in exchange for musical talent, the same is true with blindness. The lack of sight that Jefferson had to live with is often associated with his supreme musical abilities, "the blind genius, doomed and gifted by fate to trade his eye-sight in return for his artistic talent."⁴¹ The image of a blind blues player sitting in a train depot with a steel guitar on his lap singing songs about the rough life on the road is a staple of blues iconography, but more

³⁸ "Four Dead in Chicago's Worst Snowstorm," *The Chicago Defender*, March 29, 1930, 1.

³⁹ Uzzel, 45-46.

⁴⁰ Uzzel, 47.

⁴¹ Joseph Witek, "Blindness as Rhetorical Trope in Blues Discourse," *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2. (1988), 178.

so, it was a paying job, and it was just as rewarding as playing in local juke joints, to the point that Jefferson may have played along the street or the train tracks more than he did indoors. For listeners, Jefferson's use of his various environments allowed him a modicum of financial success, rare for Americans oppressed by both their race and physical impairments. The eco-ability of blind blues musicians gave some of them a way out of blind institutions and pauperism. Blind Lemon Jefferson played the blues. He traveled like a bluesman, and he was blind. But, more than any of those things, he played the blues with such remarkable talent that he became one of the first successful blues artists.

Discussion Questions:

1. What was the role of Jefferson's blindness to his musical career? What does the author mean by eco-ability and complex embodiment?
2. What was attracted African American musicians to the Blues? What accounts for the success of men like Blind Lemon Jefferson among both Black and White audiences?
3. What were Race Records? Why was this title used?
4. What is the legacy of music from the early 20th century? Are there any connections between Jefferson's story and the Blues and contemporary music today?

Writing Prompt:

Research another Blues artist from the 1920s and compare/contrast their life and song lyrics to that of Blind Lemon Jefferson.