

# A Twist Of Lemon

By Paul Swinton



*This faded photograph of Jefferson, along with other photographs and printed record company flyers were discovered in a box of white country 78s in North Carolina in 1994. The photograph has been computer enhanced and is published here for the first time. Courtesy of Paul Swinton. With thanks to Andy Synnyszyn. NOT to be reproduced without written permission.*

**A**lthough he was not the first male country blues singer/guitarist to record, Blind Lemon Jefferson was the first to succeed commercially and his success influenced previously reluctant record companies to actively seek out and record male country blues players in the hope of finding a similar talent. Throughout the '20s Lemon spearheaded a boom in 'race' record sales that featured male down-home blues singers and such was the appeal of his recordings that in turn they were responsible for inspiring a whole new generation of blues singers. David 'Honeyboy' Edwards' acknowledgement being typical of many...

*"See... when I started playing blues, I had this guitar, got it from my sister's husband. I would sit and try and play and listen to Blind Lemon Jefferson".*<sup>1</sup> The advent of the phonograph was a crucial element in the development of blues music and Jefferson's role during this period of change was one of the most important and influential. He was a unique artist and understandably his records sold in their many thousands. Researcher Bruce Bastin, known for his extensive research in the Piedmont region of North America, said of Jefferson...

*"...there can have been few nascent bluesmen outside Texas, let alone within the state, who had never heard his music. Among interviewed East Coast bluesmen active during Blind Lemon's recording career, almost all recall him as one of the first bluesmen they heard on record"*

Virginian songster John Jackson fascinatingly recalled his early exposure to Lemon...

*"A furniture dealer, Mister Gill, used to call at the house with a horse and*

*wagon. He sold us the music box [phonograph] then used to come around once a month to collect payments for it and he would have all these big boxes of records to sell at the same time. Well, my older sister was doing day work - washing and ironing, all sorts and she would buy records by Blind Blake and Blind Lemon Jeffers and I would play along with them and that's how I learnt to play by listening to 78 records and that's how we come by so many records".*<sup>2</sup>

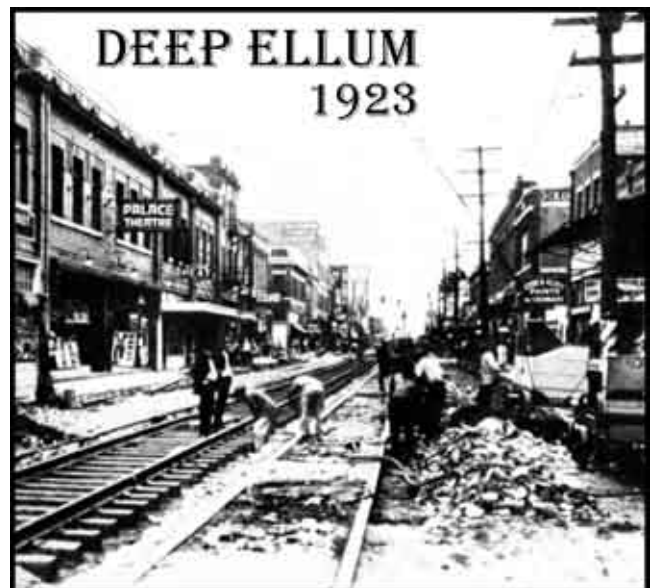
According to the 1900 Freestone County, Texas, census, Lemmon (sic) Jefferson was born in September 1893. As a young man he and his family became members of the Shiloh Primitive Baptist Church in Kirvin, Texas. Here the young Lemon first sang sacred songs and started to pick guitar. Before long, The Association Of Baptist Churches was hiring him to play at various functions and he further supplemented his income busking on the streets of his hometown Wortham and nearby Kirvin, as well as Groesbeck in neighbouring Limestone County.

Jefferson was still a teenager when he moved into Dallas. The black community in Dallas were settled in an area covering approximately six blocks around Central Avenue up to Elm Street, the centre of which was Deep Ellum, a bustling thoroughfare full of bars, clubs and brothels. In its heyday, guitarists like Little Hat Jones and Funny Papa Smith were among the numerous blues artists seen on these streets. Mance Lipscomb saw Lemon here on many occasions, the first in 1917, when several hundred people lined the H & TC railroad track that ran up Central Avenue and through Deep Ellum...

*"So, they give him the privilege to play in a certain district in Dallas. They call that 'on the track'. Right beside the place where he stood round there under a big old shade tree? Call it a standpoint. Right off from the railroad track: that was his gathering ground. An' people started to comin' in there, from nine-thirty until six o'clock that evenin'. Then it gettin' dark and get somebody to carry him home. He had a tin cup wired to the neck of his guitar. An' when you give him something, why, he'd thank you. But he would never take no pennies. You could drop a penny in there and he would know the sound: He'd take it out and throw it away".*<sup>3</sup>

There have been suggestions that Blind Lemon may, in fact, have had some residual vision. This would seem to be confirmed by his brief part-time career as side-show wrestler, that in the two known photographs of Jefferson, he is wearing different pairs of spectacles, and both have clear glass, and that he was reported to have regularly carried a loaded six shooter, a manifestly frightening implement in the hands of a visually impaired individual!

Throughout the early years in Deep Ellum, BLJ was said to be happiest in the company of prostitutes and gamblers and entertaining in their place of work. Although Jefferson's reputation was originally made as a singer of sacred songs, it follows that the percentage of blues in his repertoire would have greatly increased as the years progressed, although he would



*Central tracks running through Deep Ellum, Dallas, Texas. Courtesy of Marvin Stone / Dallas Public Library*



Like Jefferson, Coley Jones & The Dallas String Band were regulars on the streets of Deep Ellum. The number was part of BLJs unrecorded repertoire. Photo courtesy Paul Swinton.

Ledbetter. Leadbelly, in later years, was understandably proud of his relationship with Lemon. At one time he claimed to have partnered BLJ for about eighteen years, but they probably met up sometime after 1910, when Leadbelly and his wife Aletta moved into Dallas from Harrison County.

Leadbelly would play guitar, mandolin or accordion behind BLJ and he remembered typically performing the number 'Fare Thee Well, Titanic' (the S.S. Titanic sank on its maiden voyage in 1912) on the streets of Dallas with Jefferson and on other occasions, dancing while Lemon would play a guitar solo version of 'Dallas Rag'. As a team they travelled together on the railroads from town to town earning a reasonable living. In later years Leadbelly would recall how he and Lemon "was buddies" and how.. "we'd tear those guitars all to pieces". It is unlikely that they were constant companions, Leadbelly, unlike Jefferson, would occasionally resort to manual labour to supplement his income and Jefferson was more inclined than Leadbelly to exploit the financial benefits of sacred music. Whatever the case, their partnership certainly ended by January 1918, when Leadbelly (using the alias Walter Boyd) was indicted on a charge of murdering one Will Stafford, found guilty and thereafter became a guest of the Texas penal system.

Jefferson continued to travel far and wide, followed the cotton crops and visited most of the major cities in the South. At a later date he would humorously recall his first visit to Memphis:

*I wonder if the chinchies bite in Beaumont, like they do in Beale Street town?*

*The first time I stayed in Memphis, chinch bugs turned my bed around.*

[Chinch Bug Blues, Pm

12551]

Occasionally he would have a young man to 'lead' for him (both the young Josh White and Aaron 'T Bone' Walker were both employed in this capacity at one time) and as he moved from state to state, he would occasionally hitch up with other musicians.

One such musician was guitarist James Molay/Mollett, a drifter throughout most of the '20s. When Robert Dudley interviewed him in 1972, musicians he claimed to have met on the road in or around Virginia, were Jefferson, 'Sweet' Carter, Blind Joe Taggart, 'The Kid' and Benny Walker. Carter, he recalled: "played a big 12 string guitar seconding behind Jefferson ... but he (BLJ) was still louder singing and (on) guitar".<sup>5</sup>

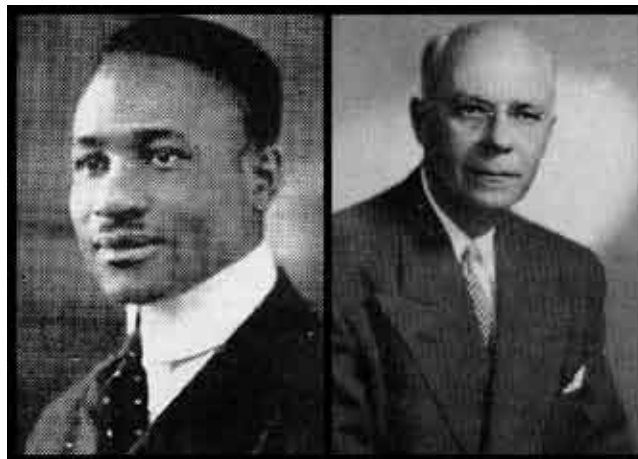
Is it possible that 'Sweet' Carter was the 1929 recording artist and 12 string guitar player George Carter? Practically nothing is known about George Carter. It is generally accepted that he was a part of the Atlanta school of musicians, although intensive research in that area has uncovered little information. On record he utilises many of the guitar runs (some of which could easily have been based on Jefferson material) associated with Atlanta 12 string players like the Hicks brothers, Barbecue Bob & Charlie Lincoln, however vocally he sounds a much older musician than them. There are further links between Carter and Jefferson. They would both record for the Paramount label, Carter's first session (c. Feb 1929) was either shared with, or in close proximity to, one of Jefferson's sessions and along with Jefferson, Carter was one of the first artists to receive the attentions and copyright claims from the mysterious 'LaMoore', whose name appears on both the Paramount & Herwin issues of Carter's 'Ghost Woman Blues'.

By 1925 Paramount Records was doing good business with its 'race' series. It mainly consisted of big-selling female vaudeville blues singers like Ida Cox and Ma Rainey, banjo player 'Papa' Charlie Jackson and various Jazz outfits. They had managed to set up some unique distribution arrangements, being the first company to instigate a mail order service and also to secure major southern wholesalers for their 'race' records. The majority of their affairs were handled in either Port Washington, Wisconsin, by Art Liably, whose official title was 'recording director', but who mainly took charge of sales, or in Chicago by Mayo Williams (the first ever coloured executive in a white recording company), who had control of Artists & Repertoire. Liably had secured a deal with Dallas record store manager R. T. Ashford

draw on both genres as appropriate. Blues singer Ruby Lacey told researcher David Evans that Jefferson once refused an offer of ten dollars to play a blues, because he had promised his mother he would never play blues on the Sabbath and retired Wortham postmaster Uel L. Davis Jnr. remembered...

*"That was the thing about Lemon, he'd be singing in a church one day, singing in a house of ill repute the next".<sup>4</sup>*

It was on the streets of Deep Ellum that Lemon met up with Huddie 'Leadbelly'



Mayo Williams and Art Liably. Photos courtesy of Pete Whelan.

to sell Paramount records. Soon after, either Ashford or possibly pianist Sam Price (who at this time was working as a salesman under Ashford), contacted Liably with the suggestion that they record a local celebrity. In due course Jefferson was bought to the studio in Chicago and one of the most successful recording careers of the pre-war era began.

Jefferson's first release, 'Booster Blues' & 'Dry Southern Blues', came out in or around March 1926. It captured the imagination of black record buyers and became a massive hit. The first pressings of this record were labelled as by 'Jefferson' (sic), but the record company soon became familiar with his name!

*Well, the Blues came to Texas, lopin' like a mule [twice]  
You take a high brown woman, man, she's hard to fool.  
She ain't good lookin' and her teeth don't shine like pearls [twice]  
But that nice disposition carries the woman all through the world.*

[Got The Blues, Pm

12354]

Lyrically, on numbers like 'Got The Blues', he would use 'floating' verses to dramatic effect, but with no discernible link. Other numbers would hold a solid theme, usually with a heavy dose of 'Lemon' humour..

*The way I feel now, I could get a keg of dynamite, [twice]  
Put it all in her window and blow her up late at night  
I could swallow some fire, take a drink of gasoline, [twice]  
Throw it up all over that woman and let her go up in steam.  
I'm gonna get in a cannon and let them blow me out to sea, [twice]  
Goin' down with the whales, let the mermaids make love with me.*

[Dynamite Blues,

Pm 12739]

Throughout 1926 there was a constant supply of new releases from Jefferson, 'Black Horse Blues', 'Jack O' Diamond Blues' and 'That Black Snake Moan' were among these classic numbers. At times there was a near perfect harmonic and rhythmic counterpoint between voice and guitar and after the delivery of each line, instead of a repetitive fill, Jefferson produced a staggering array of original licks and single string runs. Several blues singer/guitarists like Thomas Shaw and Mance Lipscomb thought Jefferson's style almost impossible to imitate with any degree of success. But there were a few recordings made in the pre-war period that managed to do so, notably Issiah Nettles (The Mississippi Moaner), who covered Lemon's 'Long Lonesome Blues' as 'It's Cold In China Blues' [Vo 03166]<sup>6</sup>. Willard 'Ramblin' Thomas (probably a one time associate of Jefferson, who was also brought to Paramount's attention by R.T. Ashford) made the excellent 'Good Time Blues' [Pm 12752], that accurately emulated the style of Lemon, and somewhat surprisingly, probably the best copy of a Jefferson number was recorded by the white country singer Larry Hensely with his version



Label shots courtesy Paul Swinton



Advertising Jefferson's only recording to feature slide guitar. Was this illustration further evidence of partial sight? Courtesy of Paul Swinton.

of 'Matchbox Blues'.

So popular were Jefferson's releases, that on more than one occasion the masters that pressed a particular 78 became so overused and worn out that Jefferson would have to return to the studio to re-make the title. At other times a fresh stamper with an alternate take of the same number would be issued. Comparison of these remakes and alternate takes with their differences of verse structure and accompaniment offer further confirmation of Jefferson's ability to improvise.



Bob Crane was a pseudonym for George Carter, but who was 'LaMoore'? Photo courtesy Paul Swinton

Blake had joined the list of Paramount's best sellers, Liably would loudly profess his superiority at locating talent and began demeaning Williams' efforts. Williams would later say of Liably...

"He bugged me that he was out in the field and had a better opportunity to get artists than I did. When he found out there was big money in this field, he became envious and jealous of me, because I had a better 'in' than he did. And then he decided that he wanted to get into the recording end of the business, and kinda bugged me a great deal, and harassed me and so forth..."

It was common practice for session 'minders' to claim at least part composer



By the time this religious recording from his first session was released with the pseudonym Deacon L. J. Bates, BLJ had already become an established blues recording star. Photo courtesy Paul Swinton.



This special Lemon yellow and blue labled record was released a few weeks before BLJ's 35th birthday. Photo courtesy Paul Swinton.

credits on some of the titles recorded under their direction as a 'perk', even possibly selecting the titles to be issued to suit their own financial ends.<sup>7</sup> Williams had never adopted this practice with Lemon, although he was drawing money from the Chicago Music publishing company, the same company through which he had registered most of Lemon's, and other Paramount artists' compositions.

Although it is probable that Jefferson was not paid all he may have been due, compared to other blues recording artists he must have still been very well paid. There are stories of his great affluence, including his return home to Wortham at one time, with his own chauffeur and car. At what stage in his short career these riches appeared is uncertain, but in March 1927 he was certainly financially motivated when he decided to desert Paramount for another record label.

The circumstances surrounding Jefferson's brief defection from Paramount to Okeh are unclear, but what is known is that, possibly by pre arrangement, Tom Rockwell & Polk Brockman from Okeh were in Dallas. While they were there they picked up BLJ and took him to Atlanta, Georgia. In Atlanta, Jefferson recorded at least 8 titles, including the historic first recording of 'Matchbox Blues', complete with the usual inventive Jefferson lyrics...

*I'm goin' to the river, gonna walk down about the sea.[twice]  
I've got those tadpoles and minnows arguin' over me.  
Sittin' here wonderin' would a matchbox hold my clothes.[twice]  
I ain't got so many matches, but I got so far to go.*

[Matchbox Blues,

OK 8455]

There was no attempt by Okeh to conceal Jefferson's identity, they probably believed that there was no need to. Paramount thought differently and were quick to respond, no doubt letting Okeh know in no uncertain terms that Jefferson was still contracted to them. Legally, Paramount were on very shaky ground, as in order to avoid tax liabilities they had made fraudulent statements and forfeited their corporate status in 1926, so any contract they may have had with BLJ might have been deemed to have little meaning.<sup>8</sup>

How the situation was eventually resolved between Paramount and Okeh will probably never be known. 'Matchbox Blues' coupled with 'Black Snake Moan' were the only two titles ever released from the Okeh material, but it is intriguing that amongst a solid block of Chicago Music/Paramount copyright registrations in the Library of Congress are the following Okeh titles!;

Reg No E659646 'Easy Rider' (probably matrix 80527)

Reg No E659647 'Elder Green's In Town' (probably Okeh matrix 80528)

Reg No E664771 'English Stop Time' (probably matrix 80529)

Reg No E664772 'I Labor So Far From Home' (sic) (probably matrix 80530)

Reg No E666273 'Match Box Blues' (probably matrix 80524?)

Reg No E667071 'Laboring Man Blues' (probably matrix 80526?)

Had Paramount demanded ownership of these titles as part of a settlement in lieu of threatened legal action? Whatever the case, the solitary Okeh release by Jefferson sold very well and certainly spurred the re-recording of 'Matchbox Blues' by BLJ on his return. For the first time Paramount went to great pains in their advertising to place the words 'Exclusive Paramount Artist' after every mention of his name and in the Chicago Defender (23-4-27), even inferring that the previous Okeh release of this title was not by the real Jefferson!:



Courtesy Rolf Von Arx

"Be sure to hear Paramount 12474 by the original Blind Lemon Jefferson, exclusively Paramount. Beware of imitations or substitutes."

Jefferson would not stray again, a later attempt to lure him to Columbia failed at the first hurdle, suggesting that the 'Okeh lesson' had been well learnt.

In his excellent book, 'The Bluesmen', Sam Charters quotes lyrics for 'Elder Green's In Town' and music for the instrumental 'English Stop Time'. This has since given rise to persistent rumours that tests existed of these titles.<sup>9</sup> I have recently managed to communicate with Sam Charters and he has told me "unfortunately, all I found of the two Blind Lemon titles were the notated lead sheets filed for copyright, I know of no tests existing of these titles".

If Sam Charters statement has shattered an avenue of fantasy for any collectors - fear not, there is hope elsewhere, as among nearly fifty Jefferson Chicago Music registrations lodged with the Library of Congress, there are four titles bearing Jefferson's name, that do not appear in B&GR:

Reg No E693046 'Light House Blues' (registered May 31 1928)

Reg No E693572 'Too Black Bad' (registered June 21 1928)

Other known Jefferson titles registered at the same time as the above were from his c. February 1928 recording session.

Reg No E.U.S. unpub. 388 'It's Tight Like That' (registered Oct. 18 1928)

Reg No E.U.S. unpub. 392 'Pineapple Blues' (registered Oct. 18 1928)

Other known Jefferson titles registered at the same time as the above were from his c. July 1928 recording session.

Although the titles 'Too Black Bad' & 'It's Tight Like That' have obvious connections with Tampa Red and could have simply been registered in the wrong name, recording and registration dates suggest that these titles probably were recorded by Jefferson as 'covers', and that he was erroneously listed as composer. However, 'Light House Blues' & 'Pineapple Blues' are likely to be two previously unissued and unknown Jefferson compositions.

By 1928 the rivalry that had existed between Mayo Williams and Art Liably had turned their working relationship sour. Things finally came to a head



Courtesy Paul Swinton



Paramount's familiar publicity photograph, probably taken in 1925. The signature is in the same handwriting as Blind Blake's publicity photograph of the same period. Photo courtesy B&R archive.

when Liably started to use Williams' trusted secretary, Aletha Dickerson, as his own. Williams became disillusioned with the way his position was being undermined and when Paramount founder Otto Moeser informed him that he was to lose his financial independence and be put on a straight salary, Williams resigned his position, left Paramount and moved on to direct the 'race' recording program of Brunswick and Vocalion.

Even after the departure of Mayo Williams, it is unlikely that Aletha Dickerson would have taken the responsibility of Jefferson. Sam Charters says she recalled Jefferson ... "with a shudder of disgust".

During Williams' reign at Paramount, Dickerson had unsuccessfully tried to introduce her husband, Alex Robinson, into the Paramount set up. With Williams gone, Robinson soon became involved, even recording as part of The Hokum Boys and may have been the one responsible for arranging BLJ's sessions thereafter. In early 1929 the name LaMoore (or in one instance, A. LaMoore) first started to appear on the credits of recordings by Papa Charlie Jackson, Hattie McDaniels (of Gone With The Wind fame), George Carter and Jefferson. Dickerson had used the name 'Selma Davis' on some of her copyright registrations and perhaps her husband Alex had adopted the name of 'LaMoore' for the same purpose. Dickerson would be interviewed



Dime Box, Texas. Jefferson performed near here in 1928. Photo courtesy the Paul Swinton files.



Courtesy Rolf Von Arx

in later years, and could probably have given the answers, but despite her intimate knowledge of the Paramount inside story, many questions remained unasked of her. By the time English researcher Ernest Virgo had contacted her in the mid '80s she had lost the desire to talk any more about Paramount or its artists, let alone Jefferson, whom she had regarded as uncouth and had disliked intensely.

There was a slightly more thematic approach to BLJ's releases after Mayo Williams' departure, including a 'Christmas Eve Blues' coupled with 'Happy New Year Blues' and no less than five prison related blues, which were ideal vehicles for Jefferson's imaginative lyrics...

*I wonder why they electrocute a man after the one o'clock at night?*

[twice]

*Because the current is much stronger, when the folks has turned out all the lights.*

[Lectric Chair Blues, Pm

12608]

*I want you to stop and study and don't take nobody's life. [twice]*

*They've got wall's at the state penitentiary you can't jump, man, as high as the sky.*

[Blind Lemon's Penitentiary Blues, Pm

12666]

His 'Lock Step Blues' referred to the co-ordinated march of prisoners who have had their legs shackled together...

*I'm used to shakin' my feet in a midnight prance. [twice]*

*Now they've got me doing a different kind of dance.*

*Mean old jailer's taken away my dancin' shoes. [twice]*

*I can't strut my stuff, when I've got those lockstep blues.*

[Lockstep Blues,

Pm 12679]

There were less successful releases, like a hastily put together cover of Leroy Carr's 'How Long, How Long', with pianist George Perkins desperately trying to stay with Lemon's erratic phrasing, but in general, the standard remained high.

The continuing successful sales of Jefferson's records and the resulting increase in his fame would seem to have guaranteed large attendances for the personal appearances that he made throughout the country and especially in his home state. One particular performance was witnessed by a sixteen year old Charles Curtis just outside Austin in the summer of 1928...

*"People hear and say 'Blind Lemon's playing at so and so' and they'd come from all over. I travelled from [ ], see, we had all them records, the 'One Dime Blues' and the 'Rabbit Foot Blues', but we wanted to hear him play in person, you know?.. must have been hundreds of people come to see him and make him play all day, by the time he finish, he hardly had no voice!"<sup>11</sup>*

Although Jefferson is said to have remained a resident of Dallas, Texas, he travelled north on so many occasions, it is not surprising that current research by Chris Henderson suggests that Jefferson spent some time resident in South Calumet Avenue, on Chicago's South Side<sup>12</sup> and a recent interview with the son of Paramount founder/ president Otto Moeser revealed that BLJ would stay at the Moeser residence on Grand Avenue, Port Washington, Wisconsin.<sup>13</sup> In the last year of his life Jefferson was as popular as ever and still travelling extensively. John Jackson related one gig witnessed by his mother only months before Jefferson's last recording session...

*"See, Lemon Jeffers and Jimmy Rodgers and them, they were as popular as Elvis Presley. Really! My Ma, she'd talk about Lemon Jeffers, he'd played for three days in the lower part of Virginia for an old school*

*association. People come from miles around ... picnic and listen to him play. Well I don't remember ever seeing him, no more than what she said. I got every reason to believe it is true".<sup>14</sup>*

If B&GR is correct, then BLJ's last recording session took place on Tuesday 24th September 1929. By this time Paramount were in serious financial difficulties. They had distribution problems and a poor catalogue filled with fading stars. Within three years they had folded. But before that time, Lemon Jefferson was dead.

There has been more discussion and speculation regarding the death of BLJ than probably any other early blues singer. Numerous requests, including my own, have been made to The Illinois Dept of Public Health in Cook County for a death certificate, without result.<sup>15</sup> Whether Jefferson was admitted into a hospital at this time, or his body examined, is not known, as it seems that relevant records for the main hospitals operating in Chicago at that time are either unavailable or have been destroyed. Nevertheless, even without the official paperwork, it is possible to deduce the cause and probable date of Jefferson's death from other evidence available. Firstly, the newspaper report that appeared in 'The Wortham Journal' on January 3rd 1930...

*"Lemon Jefferson, 45, a blind Negro who was reared in Wortham and the community, died of heart failure in Chicago and was shipped to Wortham for burial, arriving here on Christmas Eve".* Also, both Art Liablely and Mayo Williams independently stated in later interviews that Lemon had died at the same time as a snow blizzard was pounding Chicago and finally, according to the 1929 Annual Meteorological Summary for Chicago Illinois, the first snow of winter fell in November but only on one day with 0.1 inches (flurry), this being the total snowfall for the month, however, in December, *"the total snowfall, 20.2 inches, exceeded by 1.1 inches the previous total for any December. The greatest 24 hour snowfall was 11.1 inches and occurred on the 18th - 19th during one of the worst snowstorms on local record".*

Coupled with the newspaper report that BLJ's body arrived in Wortham on Christmas Eve, it seems reasonable to conclude that BLJ probably died of a heart attack on or around the 18/19th December 1929.

After BLJ's death, none of the northern newspapers printed the news of his demise, in fact for a couple of months, Paramount continued to issue records and accompanying advertisements as if nothing had happened. There is no doubt that the record company knew about his death. Later interviews with ex Paramount staff (including Mayo Williams, who says that after he had left Paramount, he acted as an agent for Jefferson) confirm that when Jefferson died, he was in Chicago with his 'wife' (possibly Roberta, whom he is said to have married in 1922). She had asked Paramount to get BLJ's body back to Texas and the record company had duly paid for this to be done, even enlisting pianist Will Ezell (who was also employed by Paramount as a sort of odd job man) to accompany the body south.

Despite Paramount's silence there were tell tale signs that BLJ had ceased to be. Firstly, composer credits on all his posthumous releases were now solely in the name of 'LaMoore'. Also, the Chicago Defender advert for 'Yo Yo Blues' (28th Dec. 1929), which must have been placed before BLJ's death, was repeated on 15th February 1930. This was to be the only advert the record company would ever repeat and suggests that this was a conscious effort to maximise the sales of their few remaining BLJ titles. Even more blatant was the issue of 'Hometown Skiffle' [Pm 12886].



*One of the rarest and most sought after Jefferson records. This uncharacteristically 'raggy' performance may have been instigated by Paramount as a reflection of the success of Blind Blake, but it is more likely to represent a typical example of BLJ's repertoire outside of the recording studio. Photo courtesy Paul Swinton.*



Courtesy Paul Swinton

B&GR lists this as being recorded in October 1929. However, as it is likely that this session was hastily organised in reply to Vocalion's 'Jim Jackson's Jamboree' [Vo 1428], then it is much more likely to have happened only a short while before its advertised release on 22nd February 1930. The two part record was a kind of 'sampler', supposedly featuring the cream of Paramount artists. Despite the fact that he was still the record company's no. 1 seller, his 'appearance' does not occur until side two. M.C. Alex Hill, having freely brandished everyone else's name around, seems careful not to perjure himself: "Now folks, you can guess who this is" and after a few seconds of guitar playing in the style of BLJ (probably played by Blind Blake) declares "That'll get it!", and moves on without further mention of the maestro. It probably fooled some record buyers, but even Paramount at this point must have realised that it was time to come clean, and in order to wring the last drop of market potential from BLJ's name they commissioned a special double sided tribute to the late BLJ in March 1930.

The lyrics of 'Wasn't It Sad About Lemon' gave no further clues about BLJ's last moments, except, perhaps, to confirm the severe weather conditions:

*"The weather was below zero, the day he passed away"*  
John Byrd & Walter Taylor

[Pm 12945]

The reverse was a sermon called 'Death Of Blind Lemon', the words of which bring home just how short Jefferson's reign of fame was....

*"My friends, Blind Lemon Jefferson is dead and the world today is in mourning over this loss...Let us pause for a minute and think of the life of our beloved Blind Lemon Jefferson, who was born blind. It is in many respects like that of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Like Him, unto the age of thirty he was unknown and also like Him, in the space of a little over three years, this man and his works were known in every home"*

Rev. Emmett Dickinson [Pm

12945]

There is still a possibility that further information could surface regarding Lemon's life and death. Perhaps the lyrics of 'My Buddy Blind Papa Lemon' [Paramount 13125], recorded in 1932 by the enigmatic King Solomon Hill, might reveal something... if a copy is ever found!

Thankfully, all BLJ's issued titles have been located and have been reissued in practically every known format. The original 78s fetch high prices at auction. Although most issues are not particularly rare (Pm 12493 & Pm 12933 the exceptions) and were originally sold in their thousands, shellac is a fragile material, as John Jackson explained..

*"I had nearly all Lemon Jeffers' records. I had over five hundred 78s altogether, then when I moved to Fairfax, the man that moved me, he must of drove over every hole in the road, broke up every one of the records but one, and I took that out the box, put it on the bed & my wife sat on it!"<sup>14</sup>*

The condition of copies that have survived the likes of Mrs Jackson usually range from bad to worse, and as the recording quality of even brand new Paramounts was appalling, we perhaps should be grateful that we can hear them at all. Perhaps it is time that the recorded legacy of BLJ be given the benefits of modern technology, as has recently been undertaken with the complete outputs of Bessie Smith and Robert Johnson.

When Jefferson lived in Wortham, Texas, at the beginning of this century, it was a booming oil town. Today, it is quiet and desolate. Jefferson's body rests here and this year, thanks to the efforts of many dedicated enthusiasts, a memorial headstone will, at long last, mark the grave of Blind Lemon Jefferson, one of the greatest singer/ guitarists in the history of Afro American music.

## NOTES:

- <sup>1</sup> Paul Swinton interview with David 'Honeyboy' Edwards, May 1991.
- <sup>2</sup> Paul Swinton interview with John Jackson, Fleet, Hampshire, Aug. 1995.
- <sup>3</sup> Mance Lipscomb with Glen Alyn, 'I Say Me For A Parable', pp200, Da Capo Press 1993.
- <sup>4</sup> Waco Tribune-Herald, June 2nd 1983.
- <sup>5</sup> The transcript of this interview gives no further detail on Lemon and not for the first time, an opportunity of further detail was lost. When Bob Dudley died in 1991 I inherited his research files. In 1993, I attempted, with little success, to follow some of his research leads in the U.S.A. including a Farmville, Virginia address for Molett.
- <sup>6</sup> According to Houston Stackhouse, the great Tommy Johnson also included this number in his repertoire.
- <sup>7</sup> Freddie Spruell, who was resident in Chicago, connected with Paramount in 1929. It is likely that Aletha Dickerson was his session organiser and probably chose the final selections that would be issued. His solo compositions, 'Morning Blues' and 'Bed Light Blues' (both unlisted in B&GR but registered for copyright), remained unissued, while 'Low Down Mississippi Man' and 'Tom Cat Blues', 'co-written' by Dickerson were issued.
- <sup>8</sup> The most in depth look at the dealings of Paramount is documented in Stephen Calt's excellent study 'Paramount - The Anatomy Of A Race Label', serialised in 78 Quarterly magazine, nos 3 to 7.
- <sup>9</sup> Furthered fuelled by one contemporary European musician who included 'New Orleans Stop Time' in his stage act and announced on more than one occasion that he had learnt the piece from a Sam Charters test pressing.
- <sup>10</sup> Research, including interviews with ex Paramount employees, would seem to reveal no other mention of LaMoore, other than these copyright entries - suggesting the name is almost certainly a pseudonym.
- <sup>11</sup> Paul Swinton interview with Charles Curtis, Charleston WV, Sept. 1993.

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*Fabulous Thunderbirds ad  
(Crosscut)*