

# “Black Snake Moan” / “Match Box Blues”--Blind Lemon Jefferson (1927)

Added to the National Registry: 2014

Essay by Jas Obrecht (guest post)\*



“Black Snake Moan”



Jefferson



“Match Box Blues”

During the 1920s Blind Lemon Jefferson emerged as America’s most famous country bluesman. He was one of the first to record, and his 78s were heard from coast to coast. Jefferson’s best songs forged original, imagistic themes with inventive arrangements and brilliantly improvised solos. His lyrics created a unique body of poetry--humorous and harrowing, jivey and risqué, a stunning view of society from the perspective of someone near the bottom.

Jefferson was a *serious* showman, balancing a driving, unpredictable guitar style with a booming, two-octave voice. “He hollered like someone was hitting him all the time” is how the Rev. Gary Davis described him. Piercing enough to be heard above the clang and din of city streets, Jefferson’s wailing vocals set him apart from many of his contemporaries. His guitar became a second voice that complemented rather than repeated the melodies he sang. He often halted rhythm at the end of vocal lines to launch into elaborate solo flourishes. He could play in unusual meters with a great deal of drive and flash, and was adept in many keys.

“His guitar never dominated his songs,” says bluesman John Hammond, who added:

It was so succinct. It was just perfect playing. He had a distinctive way of doing solos, and his voice was incredible! He could moan and howl and really put a song across. Blind Lemon influenced everybody, because his records in the 1920s were all over the United States. He especially had an impact on a lot of white players--vocally, more than with his guitar style. His guitar style was so advanced, unique, amazing, and just hard to do. Jimmie Rodgers in particular must have just flipped out over Lemon.

B.B. King also counts Jefferson among his inspirations: “His touch is different from anybody on the guitar--still is. I’ve practiced, I’ve tried, I did everything, and still I could never come out with the sound as he did. He was majestic, and he played just a regular

little 6-string guitar with a little round hole. It was unbelievable to hear him play. And the way he played with his rhythm patterns, he was way before his time, in my opinion. Blind Lemon was my idol.”

Born blind in rural Freestone County, Texas, in 1893, Lemon Jefferson first sang in the Baptist Church. By his teens, he had acquired a guitar, taught himself to play, and was performing at country suppers and in front of buildings in the nearby towns of Wortham and Kirvin. During his late teens he moved to Dallas, where he eventually roomed in a small house at 1803 Preston, near the Central Railroad tracks. Jefferson mostly played in the city’s Deep Ellum section, sometimes in the company of Lead Belly, who credited Jefferson with teaching him single-string runs on guitar. Around 1923 Jefferson married a woman named Roberta--neighbors in Wortham remembered her as mousy and quiet--and within a couple of years they had a son. By then Jefferson was reportedly so heavy that he had to play with his guitar perched atop his stomach, the instrument’s upper bout just under his chin. His friend Alex Moore sighed, “He was the eatin’est man I ever saw.”

During the mid-1920s, Paramount Records customers wrote in requesting 78s of country blues artists. There are two versions of how Blind Lemon was signed to the label. In one, Sammy Price, a black pianist, who worked in R.J. Ashford’s Dallas music store, recommended Jefferson to the label. Another account holds that Paramount recording director Arthur C. Laibly heard Jefferson playing on a Dallas street. Since Paramount didn’t have recording facilities in the South during this time, Jefferson went to Chicago to make his debut recordings. He attended his first session in late 1925 or early ’26, cutting two religious songs under the pseudonym Deacon L.J. Bates. At his next session, in March ’26, Jefferson worked under his own name and played the blues. The date yielded a pair of 78s unlike anything heard before: “Booster Blues”/“Dry Southern Blues” and “Got the Blues”/“Long Lonesome Blues.” Sales of these records were strong, due in part to Paramount’s innovative mail-order service to rural communities.

Producer Mayo Williams remembered that during the Chicago recording sessions, Blind Lemon was “just as cool and calm and collected as any artist I’ve ever seen.” Jefferson continued to cut 78s for Paramount during 1926, notably “Black Horse Blues,” “Corinna Blues,” “That Black Snake Moan,” and a slide guitar version of “Jack O’Diamonds Blues.”

In 1927, Blind Lemon Jefferson moonlighted for Okeh Records. Okeh’s Polk Brockman and T.J. Rockwell arranged for the session, which was to be held in Atlanta on March 14 and 15. They escorted Jefferson to the Dallas train station and arranged to follow him on a later train. When Jefferson was late showing up in Atlanta, Brockman asked where he’d been. Jefferson responded that he’d never been to Shreveport and had stopped off to “see” the town. “He got around remarkably well for a blind man,” Brockman told “Living Blues” magazine. Asked if Jefferson had misgivings about recording for another label, Brockman responded, “No, he was ready.” In all, Jefferson recorded eight songs for Okeh, but only one 78 was issued: “Black Snake Moan” backed

with “Match Box Blues.” This release, Okeh 8455, had a superior sound to the various versions of the same songs that Jefferson recorded for Paramount Records.

Jefferson’s Okeh version of “Black Snake Moan” was a close cover of “That Black Snake Moan,” which he’d recorded four months earlier for Paramount Records. Like its predecessor, he began “Black Snake Moan” with an account of a situation that’s been familiar fodder for blues singers ever since:

*I ain’t got no mama now,  
I ain’t got no mama now,  
She told me late last night, “You don’t need no mama nohow”*

Few mature listeners were likely to miss the next verse’s innuendos:

*Mmm, black snake crawlin’ in my room,  
Mmm, black snake crawlin’ in my room,  
And some pretty mama had better come here and get this black snake soon*

For sheer hard-luck poetry, it’s hard to top Jefferson’s next verse:

*Ohhh, that must been a bed bug, you know a chinch can’t bite that hard,  
Ohhh, that must been a bed bug, you know a chinch can’t bite that hard,  
Asked my baby for fifty cents, she said, “Lemon, ain’t a child in the yard”*

“Chinch” was common slang for “cockroach.”

Jefferson saved his best guitar playing for the final verse, flat-picking brilliant solo flourishes at the end of each vocal line:

*Well, wonder where this black snake gone,  
Well, wonder where this black snake gone,  
Lord, that black snake, mama, done run my darlin’ home*

The most famous line of the Okeh 8455’s B side, “Match Box Blues,” was likely inspired by Ma Rainey’s 1924 Paramount recording of “Lost Wandering Blues,” in which she sang, “I’m standin’ here wonderin’ will a matchbox hold my clothes?” Jefferson began his first--and best known--recording of “Match Box Blues” with an enigmatic opening verse:

*I’m goin’ to the river, gonna walk down by the sea,  
I’m goin’ to the river, walk down by the sea,  
I got those tadpoles and minnows arguin’ over me*

His second verse proved to be the song’s most enduring, reappearing in various forms in countless cover versions:

*Standin' here wonderin' will a match box hold my clothes,  
I's sittin' here wonderin' will a match box hold my clothes,  
I ain't got so many matches, but I got so far to go*

This signature verse and the next two would be the only ones Jefferson included in his later recordings of “Match Box Blues”:

*Lord, mama, who may your manager be?  
Hey, hey, mama, who may your manager be?  
Reason I ask so many questions, can't you make 'rrangements for me?*

Jefferson's next verse warned listeners about--of all things--the dangers of crocheting!

*I got a girl 'cross town, she crochet all the time,  
I got a girl 'cross town, crochet all the time,  
Baby, if you don't quit crocheting, you gonna lose your mind*

He then described his ideal matrimonial situation:

*I wouldn't mind marryin', but I can't stand settlin' down,  
I don't mind marryin', but, Lord, settlin' down,  
I'm gonna act like a preacher so I can ride from town to town*

Jefferson energized the final verse with sure-handed boogie bass lines that are a precursor of rock and roll:

*I'm leavin' town, cryin' won't make me stay,  
I'm leavin' town, eee, cryin' won't make me stay,  
Baby, the more you cry, the further you drive me away*

When Paramount protested the 78s release, OKeh withheld the other six songs recorded during the session. The following month, Jefferson was back in Chicago recording for Paramount, the company for which he'd make all of his subsequent recordings. His April 1927 sessions produced two takes of “Match Box Blues” intended to compete with the OKeh release. Unlike the OKeh version, Jefferson punctuated his Paramount performances with audible footstomps. Each of the Paramount versions began with a variation of the OKeh release's “I'm sitting here wondering” verse. He recycled the “crochet” verse in one version, and the “manager” verse in the other, but the rest of the lyrics were unique to each recording.

Judging from reported sightings, Jefferson spent considerable time on the road. In between his recording sessions and rambles, Jefferson stayed in Dallas or at his kitchenette apartment on Chicago's South Side. His financial success was such that he could afford to travel in a chauffeur-driven Ford and at one time had \$1,500 in the bank.

Blind Lemon Jefferson passed away in December 1929. For decades, mystery surrounded the circumstances of his demise--some said he froze to death on a Chicago street corner, others claimed he was poisoned by a jealous lover. Rube Lacy speculated that "he just died overnight from being too fat, just smothered to death." More recent evidence suggests the cause was chronic myocarditis. More than 200 people watched as his body was laid to rest in the Wortham Negro Cemetery.

Through the decades, Blind Lemon Jefferson's style has reverberated through many players--Son House, Texas Alexander, Ramblin' Thomas, Lead Belly, T-Bone Walker, Lightnin' Hopkins, John Lee Hooker, J.B. Lenoir, Johnny Shines, Mance Lipscomb, B.B. King, and the list goes on. "Match Box Blues" proved to be his most enduring song of all, becoming a rock standard, with notable covers by Carl Perkins, the Beatles, Bob Dylan, John Fogerty, Taj Mahal, and many others. To this day, Blind Lemon Jefferson ranks among the most gifted and individualistic artists in blues history.

*Jas Obrecht is a longtime editor for "Guitar Player" magazine and is the author of "Rollin' & Tumblin': The Postwar Blues Guitarists" (Miller Freeman, 2000), "Early Blues: The First Stars of Blues Guitar" (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), and "Talking Guitar: Conversations with Musicians Who Shaped Twentieth-Century American Music" (University of North Carolina Press, April 2017).*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.