

In Search of Blind Blake

Arthur Blake's death certificate unearthed

By Alex van der Tuuk, Bob Eagle, Rob Ford, Eric LeBlanc and Angela Mack

It is interesting to observe that the New York Recording Laboratories recorded and issued a relatively large group of blind musicians for their 'race' series, the Paramount 12000 and 13000 series. One would only have to think of blues artists like Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Arthur Blake, Blind Willie Davis, Blind Roosevelt Graves and Blind Joel Taggart to name some of the most important exponents.

Some of these musicians were known to have travelled extensively, witnessed in many states across the country. Texas-born Lemon Jefferson had a chauffeur and car by the time he made a lot of money from the sales of his records and was able to travel to Chicago, Illinois, either by his own transportation or by train, but was also seen in many cities in both his home state and Mississippi and Louisiana. Thanks to thorough research and publications we have a fairly complete biographical picture of Lemon, although his definitive biography still needs to be written. For years Paul Swinton worked on a biography and even stated after his publication on Jefferson in *Blues & Rhythm* in August 1997 that he had

almost completed the manuscript. A framed copy of the envisioned cover of the book hangs in his record room. Hopefully such an important work will see the light of day in the near future.

Blind Arthur Blake, Blind Willie Davis and Blind Joe Taggart have been the ultimate frustration for researchers. Especially Blind Blake, for whom not a shred of official documentation has been found that he ever walked on this planet, aside from a handful of accounts collected from people who saw him play or played with him.

We only have an occasional report in the *Chicago Defender* and the legacy of his Paramount recordings. For sixty years we have had to rely on these reports to get an idea of his life, supported by analysing the lyrics of his recorded repertoire. Early evidence suggested his real name was Arthur Phelps, a claim supported by the details of an interview with Blind Willie McTell in 1951.(1)

Although McTell was known for his accurate accounts of musicians, events and songs, today's researchers now seriously doubt this shred of information, especially since it cannot be backed up with information from census reports and other documents. Although Blake reportedly originated from Jacksonville, Florida,(2) in 1968 a Blake family was reported living in Patterson, Georgia, just across the Georgia-Florida border.(3)

It would take another thirty years before this lead was taken up again by Gayle Dean Wardlow and Joel Slotnikoff for a final field trip in search of

Blind Blake. The results were published last year on Slotnikoff's website. With Blind Blake's portrait in hand Wardlow and Slotnikoff visited Patterson. Our blind performer was identified by a Blake family as having been 'a Blake relative', especially after comparison with a photo of a William Blake.(4)

There is indeed a striking resemblance, but the family did not recall Blind Blake. Reports suggest that Blake visited Chicago, Illinois, during recording sessions for Paramount and boarded with Paramount executives or lived in an apartment run by one Rennett Pounds.(5)

He even had his own apartment on 31st and Cottage Grove, but was thought to have returned to Jacksonville, Florida, during the winter months. He reportedly still played here in the 1930s, playing in front of a hotel, but after that he disappeared from the radar. Even reports on his death vary in place and year, although general consensus suggests he seems to have met a violent death.

Finding official documents on Blake appeared to be one

of the toughest nuts to crack, but did not seem impossible. Lemon Jefferson's death certificate did turn up as late as 2009 when it was found listed under a different Christian name, notably supplied by his landlady.

Night And Day Blues

By the early 1990s a new, important instrument for researchers was starting to develop: the Internet. Researchers were already integrating official documents into their publications, like census reports from the Federal Census Bureau, as well as information found on birth and death certificates.

Privacy laws in the 1960s and early 1970s had not yet placed restrictions on researchers attempting to obtain death certificates. This enabled investigators to form skeletal biographies of artists whose histories heretofore were complete blanks. By the mid-to-late 1990s copies of taped interviews could be made available for research, although requests still had to be made by mail.

The older methods of communication, where interview questionnaires were conducted through letter or via telephone conversations, were making way for electric communication, like email. Ten years later social networks such as Facebook started to become a source for finding relatives of artists who had passed away long ago.

By combining digital genealogy databases (making available census reports, as well as birth, marriage and death certificates, from the late eighteenth century until 1930) with online phonebooks and even social networks it became possible to find relatives of Blind Joe Taggart, interview them and even obtain unpublished photographs from family albums.(6)

During the past decade new information on Blind Blake was as rare as hen's teeth. In 2004 a small note was found in the *Chicago Defender* of 1934. Little Buck Abel, who covered Pennsylvania with the Ward Medicine Show, wrote from York to the newspaper and in passing summed up part of the line-up, including one Arthur Blake. Could this be 'our' Blind Blake? Although thought to have been a possible candidate, it was strange that he was not referred to as Blind Blake, one of Paramount's major-selling artists between 1926 and 1932. During the years that followed every possible name was searched for in order to find official documents about Blake. With more official documents becoming available, a death certificate showed up for Papa Charlie Jackson, new information on Freddie Spruell turned up and even solving the disappearance of Elzadie Robinson was at close range. So where was Blind Blake?

In September 2010 an online newspaper search was carried out in an attempt to find musicians who had met a violent or untimely death, as supposedly had happened with Blake. Based on Rev. Gary Davis's account of hearing that Blind Blake 'had been run over by a street car in New York City about 1934', (7).

I stumbled upon a report from the *News-Palladium*, Bentum Harbor, Michigan, newspaper of 13th May 1938. On its second page a column, written by C.B. Driscoll, 'New York Day By Day' mentioned the following: 'A blind musician, depending upon his cane and knowledge of the city, walked off a subway platform down town one day last winter, and was instantly killed by an incoming train'.

Was this wishful thinking? Yes, it was. It appeared to refer to a Winter 1936 deadly accident that befell 34-year old Oscar England, an accordion player.(8) Back to square one.

December 1, 1934

Arthur Blake, 38 years, married, living at 1844-B North 10th Street, musician, unemployed past three years, was conveyed from his home by police ambulance #3 to the County Emergency Hospital where he was pronounced dead on admission at 1:51 this a.m. by Dr. Purtell. Dr. Purtell reported the case to A. H. Luebke, Assistant Coroner, at 2:05 this a.m. and stated that death was due to natural causes. Last April was treated for pneumonia for three weeks at the County General Hospital. Beatrice Blake, wife, stated that he had a cold for the past three weeks. He had the chills and pain in the chest and a cough. The past few days the cough and pain in chest became worse. Also had trouble in breathing and was feverish. Was never in good health since leaving the County General Hospital a year ago. The past few weeks he coughed up bright colored blood. Shortly before he died he had a pulmonary hemorrhage. He had no physician for the past year. Lost weight during the past year. Undertaker: E. H. Reed, Jr.

Body at Morgue.

E. W. Slotnikoff, Assistant Coroner.

STATE OF WISCONSIN SS
MILWAUKEE COUNTY

Upon examination of the body of ARTHUR BLAKE, and investigation held, I find that the said ARTHUR BLAKE came to his death on the 1st day of December, 1934, pronounced dead on admission to the Milwaukee County Emergency Hospital, in the City and County of Milwaukee, State of Wisconsin, and that the cause of his death was: Pulmonary tuberculosis.

E. W. Slotnikoff
CORONER FOR MILWAUKEE COUNTY

Coroner's report.

Search Warrant Blues

Then, on 3rd April 2011 the Blues research fraternity seemed to get lucky. Following an email by Bob Eagle on a Pre war blues discussion group, which listed a reference to an artist named Arthur Blake, performing in Miami Beach's 'Rumpus Room' nightclub in 1942, Bob was contacted by author/discographer Rob Ford. Rob sent a newspaper clipping from the 15th December 1934 edition of the *Chicago Defender*,(9) explaining that he could not find any mention of the 'Rumpus Room' but had come up with this Milwaukee death notice: 'The Raynor funeral home report the following funerals: Creed Thomas, Mrs. Lulu [?] Baker and Miss Pleasant'. Then this followed: 'Arthur Blake, an old timer in Milwaukee, who though blind won fame with his recordings, passed away at his home, 1844 North 10th Street, on Saturday, December 1. The body will lie in state at the Raynor funeral home'.

Rob continued by saying: "I guess it's possible he was in Wisconsin considering his links with Paramount?" Bob then quickly emailed long-time researcher Eric LeBlanc: "I think Rob has finally cracked Blind Blake's death! Not sure how we get a copy of the death certificate."

Eric suggested me as a contact, and supplied me with a copy of the *Chicago Defender* newspaper obituary. I was asked if I knew of someone in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin area who could help with the investigation. Angela Mack, a music teacher and a driving force behind current research into Paramount's legacy in Grafton, was the first person that came to mind.

Angela was immediately contacted. She appeared to be in the middle of winter and spring semesters' break so luckily had some time off, enabling her to travel down to Milwaukee County Courthouse the next day to apply for Arthur Blake's death certificate.

I suggested that, while in Milwaukee, she could also do a search for Arthur Blake in Milwaukee's city directories, if time allowed her to do so. Angela was excited at the possibility that Blind Blake could have stayed in Milwaukee, less than nineteen miles south of the place where he recorded his last session in 1932, and agreed to go the next day, clearing her schedule to do so. The next morning she quickly emailed that she was on her way. Arriving at the Milwaukee County Courthouse she filled in an application for Arthur Blake with the sparse details she had: the address, date of death and an approximate birth year of 1895. The County clerk told her that it would take two weeks to have it in the mailbox.

After initial relief at an absence of any official interrogation about her relationship with the deceased (today in many states, only relatives can apply and obtain such documents), the waiting started. Next stop on Angela's list was Milwaukee's Historical Society for a search for Blake in the city directories. Before the day ended she had emailed what she had found:

1934: BLAKE, Arth. (Beatrice) h1844B N. 10th

The company that was credited with having taken care of Blake's funeral, was also listed in that edition: Raynor's Funeral Home (Mrs. Nellie B. Raynor) 418 W. Cherry.

1933: BLAKE, Arth. (Beatrice) musician h621 W Brown.

1932: BLAKE, Arth. (Beatrice) artist h621 W Brown.

1931 and 1930 Directory:

Neither Arthur or Beatrice are mentioned.

This information not only seemed to confirm the report in the *Chicago Defender*, but also made clear that Blake had been married to Beatrice around 1931 and that they had made Milwaukee their hometown since the early 1930s.

While in Milwaukee Angela drove down to the area where Arthur and Beatrice lived, known as Brewer's Hill, close to Milwaukee's African American Bronzeville community. There is nothing

much that remains of the old area; all the old buildings were cleared for urban renewal and faster roads.

On to Cherry Road where the Raynor Funeral Home had been. Curiously, the old red brick building had a sign on its front wall, which read: 'Paramount. Screen Printing Corp'. It seemed like an omen.

Two days after the application for Blake's death certificate, Angela asked me to call her cell phone number urgently.

Name <u>Blake, Arthur,</u>	Date <u>Dec. 5, 1934</u>
Address <u>1844-A, N. 10th-St.,</u>	Permit No. <u>8534</u>
Owners Name _____	
Lot No. _____	Block No. <u>7</u>
<u>LARGE</u> Single Grave <u>72</u>	Range <u>115</u> Section <u>Nd</u>
Remarks: <u>Part donation</u>	
Undertaker <u>E.H. Reed Jr., Raynor Service.</u>	

Blind Blake's burial plot card.

1. PLACE OF DEATH County <u>Milwaukee</u> Township <u>23a</u> Village <u>Milwaukee</u> City <u>Milwaukee</u>		STATE OF WISCONSIN Department of Health—Bureau of Vital Statistics COPY OF DEATH RECORD Registered No. <u>4661</u> <u>Milwaukee County Emergency Hospital 16</u> (If death occurred in a hospital or institution, give its NAME instead of street and number)	
Length of residence in city or town where death occurred <u>7</u> yrs. <u>mo.</u> <u>da.</u> How long in U. S. if of foreign birth <u>7</u> yrs. <u>mo.</u> <u>da.</u>		2. FULL NAME <u>Arthur Blake</u> (a) Residence: No. <u>1844 B - N. 10th St.</u> Ward <u>10</u> (Usual place of abode) (If nonresident give city or town and state)	
Did deceased serve in the military or naval forces of the United States? <u>No</u> (Yes or No)		21. DATE OF DEATH (month, day, and year) <u>Dec. 1, 1934</u>	
3. SEX <u>Male</u>	4. COLOR OR RACE <u>Colored</u>	5. SINGLE, MARRIED, WIDOWED OR DIVORCED (Write the word) <u>Married</u>	22. I HEREBY CERTIFY, That I attended deceased from <u>last saw h. - alive on - death is said to have occurred on the date stated above, at - 1:51 p.m.</u>
6a. If married, widowed, or divorced (or) WIFE of <u>Beatrice McGee Blake</u>	6. DATE OF BIRTH (month, day and year) <u>1896</u>		
7. AGE <u>38</u> Years <u>mo.</u> <u>da.</u>	8. Trade, profession, or particular kind of work done, as spinner, weaver, bookkeeper, etc. <u>Musician</u>		
9. Industry or business in which work was done, as silk mill, saw mill, bank, etc. <u>Unemployed</u>	10. Date deceased last worked at this occupation (month and year) <u>Dec. 5, 1934</u>		
11. Total time (years) spent in this occupation <u>10</u>	12. BIRTHPLACE (city or town) (State or country) <u>New Port News, Va.</u>		
13. NAME <u>Winter Blake</u>	14. BIRTHPLACE (city or town) (State or country) <u>Unknown</u>		
15. MAIDEN NAME <u>Alice ? Blake</u>	16. BIRTHPLACE (city or town) (State or country) <u>Unknown</u>		
17. INFORMANT <u>Beatrice McGee Blake</u>	18. BIRTHPLACE (city or town) (State or country) <u>1844 B - N. 10th St.</u>		
19. FURNAL DIRECTOR <u>E. H. Reed Jr.</u>	20. FILED <u>Dec. 5, 1934 J. P. Schuller, Jr.</u>		
23. If death was due to external causes (violence) fill in also the following: Accident, suicide, or homicide? <u>No</u>		24. Where did injury occur? (Specify city or town, county, and state) <u>Dec. 5, 1934</u>	
25. Was disease or injury in any way related to occupation of deceased? <u>No</u>		26. If so, specify: <u>Dr. Frank J. Schuller, Jr.</u>	
27. Principal cause of death and related causes of importance in order of onset were as follows: <u>Pulmonary Tuberculosis</u>		28. Contributory causes of importance not related to principal cause: _____	
29. Name of operation _____ Date of _____		30. Was there an autopsy? <u>No</u>	
31. Name of physician _____		32. Name of coroner _____	
33. Name of registrar _____		34. Name of clerk _____	

Blind Blake's death certificate.

Angela answered the phone and said that she was standing in Glen Oaks cemetery in Glendale, fifteen miles south from Grafton. It appears that Blake was buried in Evergreen Cemetery which was later renamed Glen Oaks Cemetery.

Coincidentally its address appears to be on Green Bay Road. Following that road back from Glendale to Grafton will bring you to the location where Paramount's recording studio and pressing plant had been! Angela started talking. "It arrived today and I am at the cemetery where Blake is buried. The man in charge here will direct me to his grave. Can you call me back in half an hour?" I asked if she had the death certificate at hand and could she supply the data that were on it. The information came quicker than I could write. Arthur Blake, 'colored', male, was listed as a musician, unemployed, and died at the age of 38 years.

There was no birth date except for a year of birth listed as 1896. His parents were listed as Winter Blake and Alice ('?') Blake, the question mark indicating that his mother's name was an uncertainty. He was listed as having been born in Newport News, Virginia, and as having died of Pulmonary Tuberculosis. The informant was listed as Beatrice McGee-Blake, his wife. Shocked by what I had heard, I quickly asked her to ask the man in charge of the cemetery if there were any records on Blake's grave as I knew from experience that most of the cemeteries kept old records, sometimes containing additional information.

Angela beat me to it. "While I called the cemetery the man told me he had the information on file and has already made copies. I will send the stuff as soon as I can, but my scanner broke

down. Should I drive to a nearby copy store?" We decided to wait for her husband's arrival home from work and sort things out from there. Now, with the information scribbled down in my notebook, we could get started in finding Blake and his parents. I emailed Bob, Eric and Rob. The email caption read: 'Ladies and Gentlemen: We Got Him!' Supplying all the information I had obtained from Angela in those few minutes, I asked Bob and Eric to start the search for Blake in official documents.

Cold Man Blues

In the meantime the cemetery's owner had guided Angela to Block 7, Range 115, Single Grave 72. The road to that section in an outer corner of the cemetery was not an easy one to navigate. It appears that the cemetery was built on a swamp and that sewerage had been a problem for many decades. When it rained the water would remain on the muddy roads, turning them into a mud pool.

When arriving at Block 7 they found out there was no grave. Angela pointed to a neglected area and asked the owner if Blake could not have been buried there. The owner responded: "God I hope not, they are digging a road there." He said he would return to the office and check the names of nearby graves. As soon as he arrived Angela called him back and he supplied the names of people buried next or close to Blake, giving directions which eventually led her to the farthest eastern corner of the cemetery in Section 9. At that moment I called Angela again. She was standing in front of Arthur Blake's grave. There



Label shots: B&R archive.

was no grave marker and the area around it had been used as a soil dump. The grave next to Blake belonged to one Caroline Harvey. Enjoying this moment I once more asked Angela to sum up all details on the death certificate and asked her to send copies of the cemetery book information as well.

Depression's Gone From Me

After sixty years of research by various diligent investigators who had taken into account every possible Arthur Blake, we had finally found both his death certificate and his grave.

Arthur Blake appears to have spent his final years in Milwaukee's Brewer's Hill, near the location where Paramount had a boarding house for recording artists. Around the time he did his final recording session for Paramount in Grafton, he must have decided to settle down in Milwaukee and possibly shortly before married Beatrice McGee.

He either may have given up on music or due to the Depression was unable to find work. A search for a file card for Blake in the Musicians' Union did not result in finding new information. Had Blake joined a small band and performed regularly, he would have registered since Milwaukee's Musicians' Union was renowned for its 'zero tolerance' policy.

The fact that Blake was not run over by a street car but had suffered from Pulmonary Tuberculosis came as a surprise. His condition must have deteriorated very quickly, since no doctor's consultation had preceded his arrival at the Milwaukee County Emergency Hospital. It also sheds light on his financial situation, as he was most likely not able to afford to consult a doctor. Even though Blake married Beatrice McGee and they lived together for at least two years, it is awkward that no information was listed about when Blake last worked as a musician.

The cemetery card provided some more information. Besides listing the location of his burial place, it also noted under 'Remarks' that the grave was a 'Part donation'. A cemetery's employee explained that the County paid for the funeral and body parts were donated!

With the new information at hand I asked Angela to go back to Milwaukee the next day to see if a marriage certificate could be found for Arthur Blake. I also suggested a check of city directories for Beatrice McGee-Blake before 1932

and after 1934, hoping to find out if and how long she remained living in Milwaukee. Maybe there was more to discover.

Angela once more drove to the Milwaukee County Courthouse and checked for a marriage certificate in the 1926-1940 Marriage Index. Nothing. Back to the Historical Society. Checking city directories did result in finding Beatrice Blake. Between 1935 and 1949 she was listed in (almost) every edition as the widow of Arthur, moving from house to house.

By the mid-1940s she was employed at the Acme Sanitary Wiper & Waste Company as a rag cutter. After 1949 she was no longer listed. Angela decided to call the cemetery once more and ask if Beatrice was buried here as well. She was. She appears to have been buried on 23 May 1953. Her last known address was listed in their books as 1015 W. Walnut Street.

No next of kin was listed. We asked Angela to once more drive to Milwaukee and obtain Beatrice Blake's death certificate, hoping this might lead to an informant's name that could be linked to Arthur Blake.

Arthur Blake's Breakdown

The next morning Angela drove back to Milwaukee to obtain Beatrice Blake's death certificate. Immediately afterward she once more returned to the Milwaukee Historical Society for background research. While waiting for the assistant to get back with the requested books, she spotted two coroner's files on the shelf, staring at her.

Could it be possible? Quickly opening the files of Box 995, much to her surprise she found the coroner's report for Arthur Blake. Coroner's reports in Milwaukee are generally produced for deaths that are suspicious, such as murders and suicides. In this case, a coroner's report was most likely conducted because Arthur Blake died on the way to the hospital.

Amazingly, the two-page report shed light on Blake's final three years. It appears that Blake had been unemployed as a musician for the past three years. In April 1933 he was hospitalized for three weeks at the Milwaukee County Emergency Hospital in order to receive treatment for pneumonia. Ever since leaving the hospital he had never fully recovered. The weeks before his death he had started coughing up bright coloured blood.

By the time he was picked up at his address by a police ambulance, on the night of 1st December, Beatrice stated that he had had a cold for the past few weeks, with worsening chills and pain in his chest. He had also had trouble with breathing, was feverish and had lost weight during the past year. No doctor had been consulted since he left the hospital in the spring of 1933. In the middle of the night, with temperatures dropping to 39 degrees Fahrenheit, the ambulance drove to the hospital. While on their way Blake suffered from a pulmonary haemorrhage which was the final blow. Before he arrived at the hospital he died. When the ambulance arrived at the Milwaukee County Emergency Hospital, Blake was pronounced dead on admission at 0:51 a.m. He was diagnosed to have died of Pulmonary Tuberculosis, another young victim of 'The White Plague'.

Hey Hey Daddy Blues

On a positive note, we finally had access to his parents' names which were given as Winter Blake and Alice '?' Blake. Since Arthur was listed as having been born in Newport News, Virginia, the first logical step was to start searching for census information in that area. A quick search for the obvious drew a blank. No Arthur Blake, no Winter Blake or even Alice. Two days of searching all possible options in the available databases resulted in nothing substantial. Where was Arthur Blake? Where was his father? We shall see in a further article currently being researched into the history of Blind Blake.

This article is the result of a combined effort of researchers Bob Eagle (Australia), Eric LeBlanc (Canada), Rob Ford (UK), Angela Mack (USA) and Alex van der Tuuk (the Netherlands). Credit goes to Rob Ford for finding Arthur Blake's obituary in the Chicago Defender and for unearthing additional newspaper articles. Angela Mack, at our request, drove from Grafton to Milwaukee and Glendale, Wisconsin, and not only applied for and obtained a copy of the death certificate, but also checked city directories, did background research on the area where Blake lived, and found his grave and the coroner's report. As the director in this process, Alex van der Tuuk was invited to write up the results. With the death certificate now available, the team started a painstaking search for Arthur Blake and his family, finding possible answers to some old leads. And raising even more questions.

Footnotes

- 1 'Atlanta Shouts The Blues!' *Melody Maker*, 26th May 1951.
- 2 'The Paramount Book of Blues'. The New York Recording Laboratories, Inc. (Port Washington, Wisconsin, 1927), p. 15.
- 3 Fahey, John. 'Papa Charlie Jackson - An Open Letter from John Fahey, California'. *Blues World* 22nd (December 1968), p. 39.
- 4 For a complete account of their field trip, see: 'Georgia Bound. The Search for Blind Arthur Blake in 1996'. <http://www.bluesworld.com/Blake.html>
- 5 The name of his landlady appeared in the *Chicago Defender* of 23rd November 1929, p. 6.
- 6 Van der Tuuk, Alex. 'Blind Joel Taggart. Fifty Years Gone But Not Forgotten'. *Frog Blues & Jazz Annual* 2 (2011).
- 7 Bastin, Bruce. 'Red River Blues. The Blues Tradition in the Southeast'. University of Illinois Press (1995 edition), p. 43.
- 8 The original article was written by Myer Berger. 'Blind Musician, Groping in Subway, Miscounts Steps, Is Killed by Train' *New York Times*, 30th December 1936, p. 1.
- 9 Cheatham, F. 'Milwaukee News'. *Chicago Defender*, 15th December 1934, p. 22.