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.

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Following the 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, participated in 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 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 completely 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.

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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, 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'.

The news excited: '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 be taken to the Evergreen 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 at 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 that 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 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 her a day to look it up in the mailboxes.

After initial relief at an absence of any official interrogation about her relationship with the deceased relatives, (in 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) h644B N. 10th.
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 bricked 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.

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 a notation except for a year of birth listed as 1896. His parents were listed as Winter Blake and Alice ("?’ Blake), the question mark indicating that her 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 found, 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 puddle.

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
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 1935. 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. Coronor'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 "7" 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 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 was able to start the long 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.
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 landlord 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).
8 The original article was written by Myer Berger. 'Blind Musician, Gropping in Subway, Discovered, Is Killed by Train', New York Times, 20th December 1936, p. 1.