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Dramatic Publishing



"BLUES LOVERS, BE GRATEFUL. BE VERY, VERY GRATEFUL."

—Variety

Blind Lemon Blues



Musical

*Created by Alan Govenar
and Akin Babatunde*

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“Babatunde creates a larger-than-life icon. He captures the pain, joy, and earthy humor of Jefferson’s country style.” —*Backstage.com*

“I listened to the music of Blind Lemon every day for five years,” Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson has said about the artist whose music resonates throughout his plays. “Blind Lemon Jefferson was the voice of black America at that moment.” —*Variety*

Blind Lemon Blues

Musical. Created by Alan Govenar and Akin Babatunde. Cast: 3m., 3w., extras as desired. Blind Lemon Blues celebrates the legacy of Blind Lemon Jefferson and his profound influence upon the development of American popular music. Jefferson was a blind street musician who played his guitar at the corner of Elm Street and Central Avenue in the Deep Ellum area of Dallas, Texas, until a Paramount Records scout discovered him. Between 1926 and his untimely death in 1929, Jefferson made more than 80 records and became the biggest-selling blues singer in America. “The variety of the music is, in fact, the most surprising part of Blind Lemon’s musical story. He didn’t just write and sing the blues, he also wrote religious songs (“Lord, I Want to Be Like Jesus in My Heart”), comedy numbers (“Fence Breakin’ Yellin’ Blues”), and protest songs (“‘Lectric Chair Blues”). And some of his songs were personal and deeply moving, like “See That My Grave Is Kept Clean.” And while they were written more than eight decades ago, most of these songs remain very compelling, as is Blind Lemon’s mostly forgotten story.” (*Theatermania.com*) Set in New York City in 1948 at the last recording session of the legendary Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly, *Blind Lemon Blues* combines elements of traditional blues, gospel, rhythm and blues, soul, doo-wop and rap to evoke the enduring legacy of Blind Lemon and his contemporaries, Blind Willie Johnson, Lillian Glinn, Hattie Hudson, Bobbie Cadillac, Lillian Miller and Leadbelly himself. *Study guide available. Simple sets. Approximate running time: 50 minutes. Code: BE2.*

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Blind Lemon Blues

(50-Minute Version)

By

ALAN GOVENAR

and

AKIN BABATUNDE



Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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“Original New York off-Broadway production at
The York Theatre Company
September 8 to October 4, 2009
The York Theatre Company and Documentary Arts, Inc.
in association with
Central Track Productions, LLC”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our journey with *Blind Lemon Blues* began in 1997. Over the years numerous people worked with us to bring this musical to fruition. We are grateful to Margie Reese, who was then executive director of the City of Dallas Office of Cultural Affairs, for introducing us and nurturing our early workshops. Michael Jenkins of Dallas Summer Musicals helped to fund the development of our first script. Daniel P. Davison Jr. aided us in building an enduring production team.

Kaleta Doolin was and continues to be a constant source of encouragement, providing support in more ways than words could ever describe. David Evans and Luigi Monge's transcriptions of song lyrics and our workshop cast, starring Terry Martin and the late David Peaston, assisted in shaping *Blind Lemon: Prince of Country Blues*, which was presented at the WaterTower Theatre at the Addison Theatre Centre and became the basis of *Blind Lemon Blues*.

Blind Lemon Blues was commissioned by the Maison des Cultures du Monde in Paris, which staged its world premiere in France and at the Forum Meyrin in Geneva, Switzerland in 2004. Cavin Yarbrough and Alisa Peoples Yarbrough worked with us to create new musical arrangements for *Blind Lemon Blues* and joined Akin Babatunde in our ensemble cast that also included Liz Mikel, Benita Arterberry, Walter Fauntleroy, and guitarist Sam Swank. Obba Babatunde was directorial and dramaturgical consultant. Norma Miller was a choreographic advisor. Our original design team consisted of Tommy Bourgeois (costumes), Russell Parkman (set) and Steve Woods (lighting).

After *Blind Lemon Blues* was featured as part of Central Park SummerStage in 2004, Mary Cronson was a catalyst for the show's growth and launched its production in New York City as part of her Works & Process series at the Guggenheim Museum.

The insights of Jim Morgan, artistic director of the York Theatre, were invaluable to us as we worked toward a limited engagement of *Blind Lemon Blues* in 2007 and its off-Broadway premiere in 2009, produced by Documentary Arts, Inc. in association with Central Track Productions in Dallas.

Sheran Keyton and Carol Markes were part of our 2007 World Music Theatre Festival tour to nine cities in the Netherlands and Belgium. Timothy Parham, Inga Ballard, Carmen Ruby Floyd, guitarist Skip Krevens and Tony award-winner Lillias White were additional members of the off-Broadway cast.

We created the one-act (50 minute) version of *Blind Lemon Blues* in 2011 and 2012. Daniel Cicourel Hanley completed the transcriptions for the musical score and Skip Krevens recorded the guitar soundtrack CD.

AUTHORS' NOTE

Blind Lemon Blues celebrates the legacy of Blind Lemon Jefferson and his profound influence upon the development of American popular music. Jefferson was a blind street musician, who played his guitar at the corner of Elm Street and Central Avenue in the Deep Ellum area of Dallas, until a Paramount Records scout discovered him. Between 1926 and his untimely death in 1929, Jefferson made more than 80 records and became the biggest-selling blues singer in America.

Set in New York City in 1948 at the last recording session of the legendary Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Lead Belly, *Blind Lemon Blues* combines elements of traditional blues, gospel, rhythm and blues, soul, doo-wop, and rap to evoke the enduring legacy of Blind Lemon and his contemporaries, Blind Willie Johnson, Hattie Hudson, Bobbie Cadillac, Lillian Miller and Lead Belly himself.

In *Blind Lemon Blues*, Alan Govenar and Akin Babatunde delve deep into the relations between blues music and the kaleidoscope of the human experience. Blind Lemon's lyrics meld with new arrangements and choreographed movement to propel the drama and reveal the intricacies that define the myth and the man. *Blind Lemon Blues* stands as a metaphor for our need to face the dilemma of our own mortality, finding what defines and connects us, ultimately revealing our purpose in life.

After seeing a workshop production of *Blind Lemon Blues*, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson said, "I listened to the music of Blind Lemon every day for five years. Blind Lemon Jefferson was the voice of black America at that moment."

The unique aspect of *Blind Lemon Blues* is the opportunity for the use of the "open stage" to create environment, story, and choreographed movement. The simplicity of the environment should be explored through a set that is evocative of the memories of Lead

Belly, the life of Blind Lemon, and the culture of the 1920s. In the original off-Broadway production at the York Theatre, a photograph of train tracks twisting into the horizon was printed on perforated vinyl and cut into six long strips. The key props were four suitcases and two guitars. Together, the set and props should enable actors to transform the essence of the journey of Lead Belly and Blind Lemon.

Song accompaniment can utilize solo and ensemble music, as well as other instruments, such as washboards, tin cups and sticks. A CD containing a guitar soundtrack for selected pieces is available from Dramatic Publishing.

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Blind Lemon Blues (50-Minute Version)

CAST OF CHARACTERS

BLIND LEMON JEFFERSON: blind street musician who became biggest-selling blues singer in America.

HUDDIE “LEAD BELLY” LEDBETTER: American folk and blues musician of the '30s and '40s.

ENSEMBLE: as few as three men, three women, or as many actors as desired; also play multiple roles.

NOTE ON CASTING:

Because of the flexibility of the many ensemble roles, the speaking parts are designated as “ACTOR” or “ACTRESS,” producers may distribute the lines so as to suit their particular requirements.

Blind Lemon Blues

AT RISE: *The stage is bare except for LEAD BELLY, who sits in a chair positioned downstage right. The setting is LEAD BELLY's last day of life on December 6, 1949. He has been suffering from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig's disease, and has had some difficulty walking, speaking and using his hands.*

(LEAD BELLY stares off into space and sings a phrase from the song "Midnight Special" as the discordant sound of a guitar is heard.)

(Song/CD Track #1: "Midnight Special")

Traditional

LEAD BELLY.

LET THE MIDNIGHT SPECIAL

SHINE ITS EVER LOVIN' LIGHT ON ME

Here I am sittin', driftin', thinkin', singin' and sick. And who am I? Oh, who am I? Huddie Ledbetter. Folks call me Lead Belly.

They say, right before you die, your whole life passes in front of you. And you see places, things, people ... Now, truly, I hope I ain't dyin' no time soon, but I've been dreamin' a lot and in my dreams ... I see my mama, who passed on so many years ago ... I see Frederick Ramsey sittin' here across from me ... a microphone in his hand

... Frederick Ramsey, the man who recorded a hundred of my songs in just four nights in my apartment in New York City in 1948 ...

(LEAD BELLY imagines that FREDERICK RAMSEY, who produced his last recording session, is approaching him as he finishes singing the musical phrase in his mind. RAMSEY enters from upstage left, holding a blanket.)

ACTOR *(as FREDERICK RAMSEY)*. You okay, Mr. Lead Belly?

LEAD BELLY *(coughing)*. Yeah, Mr. Ramsey, I sure am ...

(Several ACTORS, ranging in number from 6 to 30, enter the stage from different directions. They are a Greek-like blues CHORUS and are symbolic of LEAD BELLY's experiences in the past and present and the different places where he has lived and worked. At this point, the scene is the day-to-day life of New York City in the late 1940s. They have gathered together in his mind, sensing his imminent death.)

ENSEMBLE. Tick tock.

FREDERICK RAMSEY. Ready for another take, Mr. Lead Belly?

ENSEMBLE. Tick tock.

LEAD BELLY. And I see Blind Lemon ...

(The ENSEMBLE choreographically moves into a semi-circle looking toward the living spirit of BLIND LEMON, who appears elevated on the stage.)

(Song/CD Track #2: “Shuckin’ Sugar Blues”)

Blind Lemon Jefferson

BLIND LEMON.

I’VE GOT YOUR PICTURE
AND I’M GONNA PUT IT IN A FRAME

LEAD BELLY. Yeah, I see Blind Lemon ...
LET THE MIDNIGHT SPECIAL

BLIND LEMON.

SAY, I’VE GOT YOUR PICTURE
AND I’M GONNA PUT IT IN A FRAME
AND IF YOU EVER LEAVE
YOU CAN FIND ME JUST THE SAME

ENSEMBLE (*as ECHOES*).
JUST THE SAME

LEAD BELLY.

JUST THE SAME

Never know how much Blind Lemon meant to me. At this point in my life ... hurtin’ all over ... hurtin’ from a disease named for Lou Gehrig ... one of the greatest ball players of all time. All kinds of people come into mind, but the only one who stays is Blind Lemon.

(LEAD BELLY becomes oblivious to the present-day world and immerses himself in his memories of his first meeting with BLIND LEMON.)

LEAD BELLY. When I first met Blind Lemon I was passin’ through Dallas ...

(Song #3: “Matchbox Blues”)
Blind Lemon Jefferson

BLIND LEMON.

I'M JUST SITTING HERE WOND'RING
WILL A MATCHBOX HOLD MY CLOTHES?

LEAD BELLY. I been on the road for two weeks ...

BLIND LEMON & LEAD BELLY.

JUST SITTIN' HERE WOND'RING
WILL A MATCHBOX HOLD MY CLOTHES?

LEAD BELLY. And I knew I wasn't goin' stay there long
... and I said ... Hey boy! Hey man! Whatcha doin' out
on my corner?

BLIND LEMON. Just playing ...

LEAD BELLY. Playin' what?

BLIND LEMON. My guitar.

LEAD BELLY. You can't play no guitar.

BLIND LEMON. How you know what I can and cannot do?

LEAD BELLY. Sorry, I didn't know you was blind.

BLIND LEMON. Blind ain't got nothing to do with it. What
you play?

LEAD BELLY. Met some Mexicans one time ...

ENSEMBLE. Mexicans?

LEAD BELLY. ... and they taught me to play a 12-string
guitar. But I can't play nothin' like that, what you playin'.

BLIND LEMON. What's your name, man?

ENSEMBLE. What's your name, man?

LEAD BELLY. Huddie, Huddie Ledbetter. What's your
name man?

BLIND LEMON. Lem-on Jefferson.

LEAD BELLY. What kind of name is that?

BLIND LEMON. Folks call me Blind Lemon.

LEAD BELLY. Hey! What's going on further on up the tracks?

ENSEMBLE. Deep Ellum ... Dallas, Texas.

(Song #4: "Deep Ellum Blues")

Traditional

BLIND LEMON. Well, take me on up that way and I'll show you.

LEAD BELLY. Yeah, Deep Ellum, Dallas, Texas. Now you gotta know this. Blind Lemon showed the ins and outs of that part of town.

ENSEMBLE. They say Blind Lemon could be in any part of town one time and show you where you at?

BLIND LEMON. That's right, I'll show you.

LEAD BELLY. Oh, you gonna show me?

BLIND LEMON. Don't be so smart. Just lead me on.

(They begin to travel as if following the old tracks in Deep Ellum. The ensemble sings "Deep Ellum Blues" [CD Tracks 3, 4, 5] as BLIND LEMON and LEAD BELLY continue their dialogue.)

ENSEMBLE.

WHEN YOU GO DOWN IN DEEP ELLUM
KEEP YOUR MONEY IN YOUR PANTS
'CUZ THEM REDHEADS IN DEEP ELLUM
NEVER GIVE A MAN A CHANCE

OH, SWEET MAMA,
DADDY'S GOT THEM DEEP ELLUM BLUES

OH, SWEET MAMA,
DADDY'S GOT THEM DEEP ELLUM BLUES

BLIND LEMON. Looka here, Partner, you hear those toes tappin'? That's R.T. Ashford's Shoe Shine Parlor and Record Shop. You smell the wood coal burning? That's old man Hodge's barbecue stand. He got some good ribs. The best in town. You feel that door flappin'? That's Star Barber Shop. They got the best shaves. Hold it, don' take another step, you smell that perfume? That's the Ella B. Moore Park Theatre and Ella B. Moore should be standing right there.

ENSEMBLE.

ONCE I KNEW A PREACHER
PREACHED THE BIBLE THROUGH AND THROUGH
BUT HE WENT DOWN IN DEEP ELLUM
NOW HIS PREACHIN' DAYS ARE THROUGH
OH, SWEET MAMA,
DADDY'S GOT THEM DEEP ELLUM BLUES
OH, SWEET MAMA,
DADDY'S GOT THEM DEEP ELLUM BLUES

BLIND LEMON. Looka here, Partner ...

ENSEMBLE.
BLUES

BLIND LEMON. Down in Deep Ellum ...

ENSEMBLE.
BLUES

LEAD BELLY. And they got the best what?

BLIND LEMON. Dice.

LEAD BELLY. Dice?

ENSEMBLE (*as GAMBLERS*). Dice!

(The stage transforms into a gambling joint. Each GAMBLER moves in a ritualized manner utilizing ham-bone slaps on their bodies to accentuate their frenetic movement.)

ALL (*as they wind up*). AHHHHHHHHH ... (*As they shoot the dice.*) AH!

BLIND LEMON. HA!

ENSEMBLE. Aww.

LEAD BELLY. Man how'd you win that?

BLIND LEMON. Don't you worry about what I do. Now, looka here partner, down here in Deep Ellum there's an alley called "Death Row," and someone gets killed every Saturday.

(ACTORS become SUSPECTS in a police line-up with their backs turned to the audience.)

LEAD BELLY. Every Saturday.

(ENSEMBLE echoes LEAD BELLY and BLIND LEMON.)

ACTRESS. Every Saturday.

ACTOR. Every Saturday.

ACTRESS. Every Saturday.

ACTRESS. Every Saturday.

BLIND LEMON. And there was this stool pigeon for the police.

ACTOR & ACTRESS. And there was this stool pigeon for the police.

ACTRESS & ACTOR. And there was this stool pigeon for the police.

ACTOR. If someone came into town that I didn't know ...

ENSEMBLE. That he didn't know, he'd ...

ACTOR. ... put yellow chalk on the back of the stranger's pants.

ENSEMBLE. Oh yeah ... h'mmm ... mmm ... so that the police could identify ...

ACTOR. ... and arrest him. (*Laughs.*) Aaaaarrreeeeesssst ...

ALL (*pointing at LEAD BELLY*). HIM!

LEAD BELLY. Blind Lemon used to stand on the corner of Elm and Central in front of R.T. Ashford's Shoe Shine Parlor and Record Shop, just playin' his guitar for tips. He had a mystery about him.

BLIND LEMON. I knows folks talk about me ...

(The ACTORS choreographically turn and face LEAD BELLY and begin to taunt him, chanting musically in a gossip rap-like manner.)

(Song #5/CD Track 6: "Gossip Interlude")

Alan Govenar and Akin Babatunde

ENSEMBLE (*as GOSSIPS and BLIND LEMON*).

I—I KNOW SOMETHING THAT YOU DON'T KNOW

I'LL—I'LL TELL YOU LATER

IF YOU REALLY WANT TO KNOW

I—I KNOW SOMETHING THAT YOU DON'T KNOW

I'LL—I'LL TELL YOU LATER

IF YOU REALLY WANT TO KNOW

(Each ACTOR becomes a different person evoking LEAD BELLY's memories of BLIND LEMON's community. Their words are spoken in a kind of talking blues with musical accompaniment. The taunting chant underlies the musical dialogue. LEAD BELLY and BLIND LEMON continue the gossip rap underneath the following.)

ACTRESS. Move from town to town, h'mmff. Why does a man who's supposedly blind wear glasses?

LEAD BELLY. He's blind all right.

ACTRESS. I don't mean sunglasses, just plain glasses. Ain't that weird?

ACTRESS. And if he was really blind, how could he tell the difference between a five-dollar bill and a one dollar bill?

LEAD BELLY. Now, you know they say if you put a penny in his cup, he'll take it out and throw it away. And he'll just say ...

BLIND LEMON. Don't play me cheap.

ENSEMBLE. Don't play me cheap.

ACTRESS. I don't know why he looks so evil all the time.

ACTRESS. I know what you mean. Well, every time I pass by him, he don't say nothin'. He just looks at me with an attitude or like he wants to slit my throat.

ACTRESS. Well, he does speak to me.

ACTOR. Yeah, what does he say?

ACTRESS. Now, chile, I didn't even know the man could talk!

(The ENSEMBLE laughs.)

(Song #6/CD Track 7: “Tin Cup Blues”)**Blind Lemon Jefferson**

BLIND LEMON.

NOW GATHER 'ROUND ME PEOPLE

BLIND LEMON (*cont'd*). You don't know me ... you don't know me ... You don't really know who I am.*(The gossip rap comes to an abrupt end as the ACTORS form a tableaux. As SPIRITS, they sing a blues-like chant heralding the birth of BLIND LEMON.)*

ACTRESS. Baby born ...

ACTOR. Baby born ...

ENSEMBLE (*as BLUES SPIRITS*). A Jefferson baby born.BLIND LEMON (*sings in a tone which evokes the embryonic power of his birth*).

SAY, GATHER 'ROUND ME PEOPLE

LET ME TELL YOU A TRUE FACT

ACTRESS. It's a boy!

ACTRESS. Got them strange eyes ...

ACTOR. Can he see?

BLIND LEMON.

THAT TOUGH LUCK HAS STRUCK ME

AND THE RATS IS SLEEPING IN MY HAT

ENSEMBLE. Blind. The youngest of seven children.

ACTOR. The Seventh Son.

ACTRESS. To Alec and “Classie” Banks Jefferson.

ACTRESS. This boy was born September 24, 1893.

ACTRESS. The Seventh Son.

ENSEMBLE. On a farm in Couchman ... a small community near Wortham. (*Singing in a blues-like tone.*)

WHICH WAS A STOP

ON THE HOUSTON AND CENTRAL LINE

ABOUT EIGHTY MILES

SOUTH OF DALLAS

LEAD BELLY.

SOUTH OF DALLAS

ENSEMBLE (*as BLUES SPIRITS*). The Seventh Son.

(*The SPIRITS transform slowly back into BLIND LEMON's COMMUNITY.*)