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Deep Ellum: Deep Texas Blues

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A train sat primed in Union Station in Dallas, Texas, to take its load north towards Chicago. A steam whistle rang out across the station, feet scraped towards the train, plucks of guitar strings faintly drifted across the crowds. A blind man in a wrinkled suit stood out front singing, "Standing here wonderin' will a matchbox hold my clothes, I'se sittin' here wonderin' will a matchbox hold my clothes." Two Dallas neighborhoods, Deep Ellum and Oak Cliff, provided the perfect backdrop for the blues.

Dallas, Deep Ellum, and to a lesser degree Oak Cliff began their rise in economic power after the American Civil War. Dallas experienced an influx of African-Americans when their population grew from 900 to 2,500 as planters imported slaves to pick cotton.¹ City fathers planned to use the black labor to build a railroad through Dallas, creating a trading center. The Emancipation Proclamation ended the plans for the city.

The song "Deep Elem Blues," embodied the spirit of the neighborhood. In traditional blues fashion, the song mentioned women, drinking, gambling, and crime. "In Deep Elem Keep your money in your socks./The women in Deep Elem/ they'll throw you on the rocks."² The temptations drove holy men away from their religion and into the arms of sin. "Once I knew a preacher, preached the Bible through and through./Went down to Deep Elem now his preaching days are through." Debauchery became so intense that officials called in the law to settle the ruckus. "When

¹ Alan B. Governar and Jay F. Brakefield, *Deep Ellum and Central Track: Where the Black and White Worlds of Dallas Converged* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1998), 2.

² "Shelton Brothers-Deep Elem Blues," video clip by Patrick Marchal, September 1, 2013, Youtube.

you go down to Deep Elem, have a little fun/Have that ten dollars ready when the policeman comes.”³

Factories followed the railroad into South Dallas. In 1883, Robert Munger invented a new cotton gin, and in 1884, Munger Improved Cotton Company opened its doors in Dallas. Later, Henry Ford also established a regional assembly plant for Model T’s in Deep Ellum.⁴ Freed men moved to Dallas in hopes of finding work and new lives. Another community formed Northeast of the city limits was referred to as “[Freedman’s Town].”⁵

As work moved workers south through the city, they began building houses along the line. The community along the railroad became known as Stringtown. Workers lived in ‘shotgun houses.’ One could fire a shotgun at the front door, the rounds would pass all the way through the house, possibly and probably hitting everything.

Many black families moved to the city for jobs after a bollweevil infestation devastated cotton crops throughout the state in the early 1890s. Men worked in meatpacking, saw mills, and oil works. They loitered at rail stations hoping to get a job. Others sought out farms nearby, harvested crops, and returned to Dallas hoping to find work on the railroad. Many black women worked as servants. Some of these women lived at a private residence and some lived in homes provided by the family they worked for.⁶

At the turn of the twentieth century, Deep Ellum became a center of black Vaudeville acts called the Black Elephant. The acts, “offered scantily clad women who entertained beer-swilling male patrons, so the Black Elephant’s real distinction may have been simply that it was a black establishment.”⁷

The Grand Lodge of the Colored Knights of Pythias provided another place for black entertainers to perform. The lodge consisted of black men who wished to join the all-white fraternity and, after denial, formed their own group, with the goal of aiding blacks and the community. The building known as The Grand Lodge, later known as the Union Bankers Building, served as the central hub of the fraternity in Dallas. The first three floors consisted of shops, business, and offices. The fourth floor housed a ballroom for dances, performances and local events.⁸

³ Ibid.

⁴ Lisa C. Maxwell, "DEEP ELLUM," Handbook of Texas Online, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hpd01> (accessed February 20, 2013).

⁵ Governar and Brakefield, 5.

⁶ Ibid, 6.

⁷ Ibid, 10.

⁸ Maxwell, *DEEP ELLUM*.

John "Fat Jack" Harris opened the Grand Central Theater, a haven for black performers, in 1908. The theater took off in 1910 when Harris presented a film of Jack Jonson boxing with a man named Ketchel. "Classic" blues musicians made their names in theaters like these.⁹

"Classic" female musicians performed an early version of the blues mixed with theater music. Lillian Glinn was the most famous; she performed at the Park Theater, building a fan base until she caught the eye of R.T. Ashford, owner of a Dallas shine parlor and record store on Elm and Central. Ashford aided Glinn in getting a record deal. Columbia Record Company signed Glinn in 1927.¹⁰

"Classic" blues flourished in the cities of the South but blues, in the modern sense, originated in Texas and the swamps of Mississippi. The devil waited at the musical crossroads of the two states. The American Heritage Dictionary defined blues music as "A style of music that evolved from southern African-American secular songs and is usually distinguished by...lyrics in a three-line stanza in which the second line repeats the first." The blues grew into something more. The era-defining genre grew out of spirituals, field songs, folk tunes, and jazz.

Sonically, the blues took cues from jazz. Musicians performed popular songs such as "Deep Elem Blues" and molded them into their own expressions that changed every performance. Blues musicians used a range of instruments from stringed to percussion. Early Texas blues consisted of a single musician playing a guitar while singing. Singers wrote originals like Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Black Snake Moan." Lyrically blues ranged from sad spirituals to songs filled with innuendo. "Black snake crawlin' in my room, Some pretty mama better come and get this black snake soon." The innuendo is hard to miss.

September 24, 1893, saw the birth of a blues giant. Lemon Jefferson was born to Alec and "Classy" Banks in Couchman, Texas. Born blind, he used music from an early age to communicate with and understand the world around him. As an unsighted, black man, Blind Lemon had few opportunities available so he played his music on street sides for change.¹¹

Jefferson walked everywhere. Unassisted, he went to towns surrounding Couchman from an early age. Quince Cox, a local resident, remembered Jefferson, "He used to play at Jake Lee's barbershop every Saturday... Then he'd get on this road at ten or eleven o'clock, and he'd walk

⁹ Governar and Brakefield, 21.

¹⁰ Ibid, 23.

¹¹ Gary Hartman, *The History of Texas Music* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2008) 68-69.

to Kirvin, seven or eight miles, he'd play and keep walking, but he knew where he was going."¹²

Around 1912, Jefferson walked into Dallas. He followed the railway from Couchman and ended up in Deep Ellum. He played on street corners like back at home. Initially he played solo with a tin can, to collect tips, wired to the head of his guitar but two other blues greats would move with Jefferson during his time in Dallas, Aaron "T-Bone" Walker and Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter. Jefferson befriended a young T-Bone Walker's family. T-Bone guided Blind Lemon up and down the streets of Deep Ellum as he performed for tips.¹³

Leadbelly played a much different role with Jefferson. The two met up sometime around 1912.¹⁴ They played and discussed blues music. The duo frequented clubs such as the "Big Four" to perform blues songs. The two traded guitar licks until they eventually split ways around 1915. R.T. Ashford contacted Jefferson with a record deal and Leadbelly killed a man.

Jefferson played along Deep Ellum's Central Avenue where Ashford's record store stood. "Sam Price [an employee at Ashford's] said that he worked there and told his boss the songs should be recorded."¹⁵ Paramount Records signed Jefferson and moved him up to Chicago. While in Chicago, Jefferson recorded seventy-one blues songs. One night, his driver, who guided him around his new home, became impatient, due to a coming blizzard, while waiting for Jefferson to leave the studio. Jefferson believed he could walk home but froze to death in the storm. Although his career blossomed in Deep Ellum, Blind Lemon Jefferson began a new blues tradition in Chicago that T-Bone Walker would continue.

Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter proved to be a point of contention between Texans and Louisianans. He was born on the eastern side of Caddo Lake on the Border of Texas and Louisiana in 1889. Both states claimed him as a native of their state but his career grew in and around Deep Ellum. He and his wife, Lethe, moved to Dallas in 1910 where they worked in fields around the city and Leadbelly played music while they were in the city.¹⁶ Before meeting Jefferson, Leadbelly found the instrument to distinguish him from other blues musicians of the time, a twelve-string guitar.

Leadbelly played alone or with Jefferson until his move in 1915. Leadbelly became a convicted murderer. His first prison stint began after he

¹² Governar and Brakefield, 62.

¹³ Jim O'Neal and Amy van Singel, ed., *The Voice of the Blues Classic Interviews from Living Blues Magazine* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 139.

¹⁴ Giles Oakley, *The Devil's Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 67.

¹⁵ Governar and Brakefield, 65.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 63-64.

murdered a black man named Will Stafford. The story went, in typical blues fashion, Leadbelly found his wife being unfaithful with Stafford whom he promptly killed in a fit of rage.¹⁷

Leadbelly seemed like a lost cause until John and Alan Lomax discovered him. The Library of Congress commissioned the father & son team to rediscover folk music and record it. Wardens allowed Leadbelly to play in prisons where the Lomaxes discovered him. Alan Lomax said that Leadbelly had a “trumpet voice. He would sing and you could hear him a half a mile away.”¹⁸ Lomax continued to explain that Leadbelly played more than just blues he also played work songs that he learned around Deep Ellum. Leadbelly literally sang his way to freedom. Governor of Texas Pat Morris Neff pardoned the bluesman.

Leadbelly would not have reached fame if it had not been for John Lomax. He felt that Leadbelly embodied “a great American artist.”¹⁹ Alan Lomax explained that Leadbelly did not become a phenomenon until John Lomax brought him north, carrying his Texas blues roots with him, and got him interviewed by local newspapers. Reporters wrote about the caring nature of Leadbelly and helped bring him into the limelight in the northern states. Folk singer Pete Seeger recalled, “Leadbelly was wonderful with kids, he used to go to schools and get the kids all singing with him.”²⁰ His popularity was a surprise because northerners did not like “countrified” music.²¹ The Lomax recordings of Leadbelly provided a new side of southern culture that northerners had never seen nor heard.

In the 1930s and 40s, Leadbelly’s repertoire was extensive. “He could remember songs and tunes from every phase of his life.”²² He performed folk classics such as “House of the Rising Sun” and continued to write new material throughout his career such as “Mr. Hitler.” He recorded six volumes of songs for the Library of Congress. Each new volume contained previously unrecorded material. He also recorded duets and live performances.

¹⁷ *The Roots of Texas Music*, ed. Lawrence Clayton and Joe W. Specht. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 99-100.

¹⁸ “ALAN LOMAX-interview-‘Remembering Leadbelly,’” video clip by wicky1, February 20,2013, Youtube.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ “Pete Seeger talks briefly about Huddie Leadbetter (Leadbelly),” video clip by Joe Stead, September 1, 2013, Youtube

²¹ “ALAN LOMAX,” Youtube.

²² Ibid.

Oak Cliff, a nearby suburb, shared origins with Deep Ellum but Dallas annexed the town in 1903. The people of Oak Cliff acted as a separate community from the rest of Dallas. Just like the neighborhood, blues musicians who hailed from Oak Cliff had a separate take on the timeless music. “T-Bone” Walker brought electricity to the blues, Jimmy Vaughan brought rock, and Stevie Ray Vaughan tied it all together.

T-Bone Walker grew up in Deep Ellum and Oak Cliff. He heard the dynamic duo of Blind Lemon Jefferson and Leadbelly belt out the blues. T-Bone took the lessons he learned from the blues giants, followed their example, and molded it into what became known as Chicago blues. Walker moved to Chicago performing as a songster, playing country, jazz, blues, and gospel.

While in the windy city, he discovered the electric guitar. The title of first musician to perform on an electric guitar is still undetermined but T-Bone claimed he played a role as one of the originators, “Well, you see, actually I’m a legend to all this [playing electric guitar]. I’m one of the oldest one. Lonnie Johnson, he didn’t play no electric guitar, he played acoustic.”²³ Lonnie Johnson originated the single note solo structure that Walker used throughout his career. His career skyrocketed as one of the premiere guitar players and blues musicians of his era.

Walker died in 1975, a year prior to another promising Dallas bluesman coming onto the scene with a band called The Fabulous Thunderbirds. Jimmie Vaughan, older brother of Stevie Ray, grew up in Oak Cliff. The brothers listened to blues records, learning their craft from the music. The elder Vaughan spoke about his take on music, “The way I approached music as a kid was as if I was doing my homework. I’d get a Freddie King record and see on the back that he liked Jimmie Rodgers and Eddie Taylor. Then I’d buy their records and see what they liked.”²⁴

Walker’s electric blues style influenced Jimmie Vaughan’s playing whether it was in the Fabulous Thunderbirds or in his solo career. “If you can hear it in your head, your fingers will find their way around the neck of the guitar,” Vaughan explained, “That’s what those guys taught me spiritually - how to trust my instincts.”²⁵ He performed a slower single note solo style reminiscent of Chicago blues. His brother took blues conventions and made them rock.

²³ O’ Neal and van Singel, 143.

²⁴ John Bosso, *Jimmie Vaughan remembers Stevie Ray Vaughan* (Music Radar, 2010), <http://www.musicradar.com/news/guitars/jimmie-vaughan-remembers-stevie-ray-vaughan-265459#null> (accessed on February 24, 2013).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Stevie Ray Vaughan became the premiere modern blues guitarist in the early 1980's. He combined influences from blues to rock and everything in between. "Stevie's exposure to music began in his childhood, as he watched his big brother, Jimmie, play guitar."²⁶ Stevie did not stay in Dallas for long, shortly after his seventeenth birthday, he dropped out of high school and moved to Austin.

Vaughan described his time in Austin, "I didn't have a place to stay, I didn't have no money. I was sleeping on a pool table in a club."²⁷ He played in multiple bands, including the band that defined his career, Double Trouble. While in Austin, he caught the eye of British singer David Bowie. He recorded guitar tracks on *Let's Dance*, Bowie's Album, while simultaneously recording songs for Double Trouble's debut album *Texas Flood*.

Bowie asked Stevie Ray to go on tour in 1983 but because of pay disagreements and management issues, he backed out last second. Double Trouble toured the United States, spreading their new Deep Ellum Blues, to support their new album. Two singles off the album became two of his most recognizable songs. "Texas Flood," a cover of a song recorded by Larry Davis in 1958, and "Pride and Joy" proved that the blues could still reach a mainstream audience in the 1980s. Vaughan's career continued until his tragic death in a helicopter crash on August 27, 1990.

The Vaughan brothers spent their careers building a new fan base for the elder statesmen of the blues and for Stevie, Rock 'n' Roll. Vaughan covered Jimi Hendrix songs such as "Voodoo Chile" and "Little Wing." "There's only one Jimi Hendrix," Stevie Ray explains. "There will never be another one. I just do my best to do what I can to carry his music on just as much as anyone else's music I've appreciated all my life."²⁸ Vaughan covered blues like the title track of his debut album *Texas Flood* and songs like Hound Dog Taylor's "Give Me Back my Wig." The birthplace of the blues cannot be pin-pointed because of the variety of songs, but the sheer musical influence of musicians from Deep Ellum and Oak Cliff is profound. Blind Lemon Jefferson and Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter gave Dallas the blues before parting ways. Jefferson moved along the railroad to lay the foundations for electric Chicago blues music. Leadbelly sang his way to freedom and into history by playing Deep Ellum music for John Lomax and

²⁶ Robin Dutton, "VAUGHAN, STEVIE RAY," *Handbook of Texas Online*, published by the Texas State Historical Association,

<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fvagr> (accessed February 24, 2013).

²⁷"Stevie Ray Vaughan- Interview," video clip by Guitlines. September 1, 2013, Youtube.

²⁸ "SRV compared with Hendrix," video clip by Agustin Blues. September 1, 2013, Youtube.

recording for the Library of Congress, opening the door to blues and folk music in the United States. T-Bone Walker guided blue musicians to the electric guitar. Texas blues slowed down a bit and allowed Jimmie Vaughan to form the Fabulous Thunderbirds. Stevie Ray rocked the blues. He added more rock 'n' roll but paid honors to the greats that built the music that he cared about, the blues of Deep Ellum.