

An Application for an Official Montgomery County Historical Marker for
Algernon "Texas" Alexander
by Coy Prather for Texas Music Magazine
and presented to the Montgomery County Historical Commission

I. Context

Algernon or Alger Alexander was born in Jewett, Texas on September 12, 1900 and died in Richards, Texas on April 18, 1954 and is buried in Longstreet Cemetery-Montgomery County, Texas. Alexander grew up working as a field hand. He would begin singing and recording in the mid to late 1920's. Recording under the name "Texas" Alexander, he would help create and popularize an original style of new American music known as the "Blues." A combination of spiritual singing and work songs, the "Blues" were born in cotton fields and sang as shouts and hollers by the slaves of the old south.

"Texas" Alexander and Blind Lemon Jefferson were the mentors and teachers to a whole generation of blues singers. Alexander in fact taught the blues to many original blues greats, including his nephew Lightning Hopkins and the famous guitarist, Lowell Fulson. Alexander was one of the first, if not the very first person to record the popular folk song -- "House of the Rising Sun". He wrote many of his own songs, including "Frost, Texas Tornado Blues" which recounted in first person the disaster when a tornado virtually wiped out the small town of Frost, Texas in 1930.

Recording from the late 1920's to the early 1950's, Texas Alexander continued singing and writing in the original style until his death. Forgotten and impoverished, Alexander was living with his grandmother when he died. He was buried in an unmarked grave at the time of his death, which location in the Longstreet Cemetery in Montgomery County was only established recently.



Longstreet Cemetery

II. Overview

Nearly forgotten today, Alger "Texas" Alexander was born into abject poverty in Jewett, Texas on September 12, 1900⁽¹⁾. He would become a seminal figure in the "blues" movement, but would die in obscurity in Richards, Texas on April 16, 1954⁽²⁾. In between he would make some landmark records and mentor some of the giants of Texas Blues.

Alexander's recording history was well-documented, but much of his "personal history" is gleaned from a few oral interviews conducted with fellow blues' artists in the 50's and 60's. Much of Alger "Texas" Alexander's personal life is a product of folklore and speculation. Reared in Richards, Texas by his grandmother Sally Beavers, Alger lived near his cousins Nolan, Edell and Willie Mae Proctor. His nephew was Lightning Hopkins.⁽³⁾

A short, very stout man, Alger worked in the cotton fields, for the railroad as a laborer, and basically did menial hard work to survive. He learned the "blues" singing with fellow African Americans in the fields. Based on "spiritual singing," the blues is a soulful moaning and wailing sound, sorrowful yet at times celebratory. Alger's tenor voice and his ability to convey the genre's shouts and chants made him a popular singer at local gatherings—picnics, baseball games and fish fries. Touring in between railroad jobs with Blind Lemon Jefferson or with his younger cousin, Sam "Lightning" Hopkins or nephew Frankie Lee Sims, Alger often performed in the Deep Ellum neighborhood, a hotbed for early jazz and blues musicians in Dallas in the 1920's. Alexander didn't play an instrument, but carried a guitar and would pay a local musician to play with him.⁽⁴⁾

Sometime around 1925, Alger was discovered by Sammy Price, the famous blues and boogie-woogie pianist from Honey Grove, Texas. The "Blues" had taken America by storm in the 1920's and Alger soon had a recording contract with *Okeh* records in New York. Proud of his lone star heritage, Alger recorded under the name "Texas" Alexander.⁽³⁾ During the period from 1927-1934 he made 69 recordings for *Okeh* and *Vocalion Records* in New York, Fort Worth and San Antonio. These include "Rising Sun Blues;" "Don't You Wish Your Baby was Built like Mine?"; "Texas Special" and "Blue Devil Blues."



Texas Alexander



Record album of Texas Alexander

"Texas" Alexander sang in the uninhibited style of the original blues vocalists. He belted out his songs like southern field hands with hollers and shouts and reportedly moved and danced while he sang. Alexander's timing (where he often dropped a beat) made him difficult to follow but allowed session players creative room to experiment and to develop new free-form styles. He played with some of the top jazz musicians of the time, especially guitarist Lonnie Johnson whose guitar solos on Alexander's records are legendary. Other musicians who "Texas" Alexander performed with were King Oliver, Eddie Lang, Willie Reed, Eddie Heywood Sr. and Texan "Little Hat" Jones.

In 1934 "Texas" went to New York and recorded with the famous jazz musicians, The Mississippi Sheiks. These vocals are more structured than the raw and primitive earlier style used by "Texas," and you can hear his "smooth as silk" mellow tenor. Alexander recorded "Frost, Texas Tornado Blues" with the Sheiks in 1934. A tornado had tragically wiped out the town of Frost, Texas in 1930, leveling the entire town and killing 60 people in the area.⁽⁵⁾ This was one of the earliest songs to lament a Texas tragedy, and Alexander's "first person account" is bone-chilling.⁽⁶⁾ A fantastic version of "Frost Texas Tornado Blues" was recently recorded by The Sojourners, a gospel and blues group.⁽⁷⁾



Texas Troublesome Blues album

During this period "Texas" Alger was known as one of the top "Blues" vocalists in America. After 1934 Alexander returned to Texas and for the rest of his life rarely left the state. This probably caused his career to regress. He returned to playing Deep Ellum and driving the Texas "chitlin circuit" of African American juke joints and bars. According to Sam "Lightning" Hopkins, he and "Texas" would often hop a bus and at each stop just start playing. Alexander would start singing, and his sensational vocal style and Hopkins' guitar would attract a crowd.⁽³⁾ After singing the "hat would be passed" and it would be on to the next town.

Alexander also toured with J. T. "Funny Papa" Smith, another Texas legend known as the original Howling Wolf. In 1939 Alexander briefly left Texas and showed up at Ada, Oklahoma where he heard a young Lowell Fulson perform at a barn dance. Fulson who would become one of the top blues guitarists of his era recalled: "I never saw a Black man with a Cadillac that long"! Fulson was offered ten dollars a day to join Alexander and "Bessie" on a tour of West Texas. ("Bessie" later turned out to be another Texas blues legend, Bessie Tucker). Fulson learned the blues from Alexander whom he called a "stoic, brooding man who would become energized when singing." "Alexander would come alive, glib and confident, he would take command of the whole room," said Fulson, "but later he would retire and stay in his room, minding his own business." Alexander was fair to Fulson who said "he treated me like a son, real protective of me." Sometime in early 1940 Fulson returned home and for the next 5 years Texas Alexander's life is shrouded in mystery.⁽⁸⁾

Nearly all written accounts have Alexander arrested for the murder of his wife (some versions say "a hatchet murder of his wife and lover.") This might explain why Alexander had shown up in Oklahoma, hired Fulson and took a bus tour in West Texas, where he was not well known. It might also explain why Alexander was described by Fulson as morose till he started performing

For over 50 years writers have echoed the line that "Alexander served 5 years in prison in Paris, Texas for murdering his wife." *But did a murder actually happen, or is this where myth has become reality?* The Texas Department of Corrections has *no record* of Alger Alexander ever serving time⁽⁹⁾ (nor does Lamar County where Paris is the county seat)⁽¹⁰⁾. Alexander has no arrest record in either Leon or Grimes County (where he lived)⁽¹¹⁾ for any felony, much less murder. In fact, *a "prison" never existed at Paris, Texas!*⁽⁹⁾ Alexander may have murdered his wife, but there is *no written evidence* this crime ever occurred! More likely, he was sentenced to a county prison farm for a couple of years and the "murder" story was "passed on" from one writer to another till it became part of the oeuvre of "Texas" Alexander's history.

The state of Texas was notorious for its "Jim Crow" laws in the early 1900's and often African Americans were arrested and sentenced to county work farms without any paper trail. Alexander was well-known for singing blues songs known as "race music." These songs were acceptable to some "Black" audiences and contained raw references to body parts, sex acts, sexual innuendo and bad women. Singing these songs in front of a "white crowd" would cause a singer to be jailed. After Alexander's first jail term (whatever it

was for) Sam "Lightning" Hopkins said "Texas showed up at his home one night badly beaten." He said "Alexander had allowed a crowd to bait him into singing Boar Hog Blues". This was a song, according to Hopkins, "Texas was not supposed to sing and it violated his parole." Alexander was arrested for public lewdness and severely beaten before he was released.⁽³⁾ It was well known that Lead Belly (who had become very popular in the late 1940's) had served time in prison. It makes sense that Alexander and his fellow blues' singers embellished Alexander's incarcerations for lewdness into "prison for murder" to add to his legend.

In the late 1940's Texas Alexander went to Houston, Texas, with his cousin Sam "Lightning" Hopkins where they performed on street corners, in juke joints and on railroad platforms. In 1946, Anne Cullum, a promoter for *Aladdin* records, heard Hopkins and Alexander performing on Dowling Street in Houston. She signed Hopkins to a contract, but passed on Texas Alexander "who scared her." Hopkins would go on to fame and record with Thunder Smith, where he gained the nickname "Lightning".⁽¹²⁾ Alexander returned to Richards, Texas and in 1950 his last recording session was with Benton's Busy Bees in Houston.

Texas Alexander toured briefly with Melvin "Lil Son" Jackson, the famous blues guitarist from Tyler, and he may have played a picnic with Albert Collins, the guitarist who inspired Stevie Ray Vaughan. Suffering from the effects of syphilis, Texas Alexander moved in with his grandmother at Richards. Broke and forgotten, locals said "Texas" could hardly walk before his death at age 53.⁽⁵⁾

Alger "Texas" Alexander was buried in Longstreet Cemetery, just past the Grimes County line in Montgomery County.⁽¹³⁾ No local paper ran an obituary. There is an effort today to have the Cemetery marked by the Texas Historical Commission and also to mark Alexander's birthplace at Jewett.

Alger "Texas" Alexander was one of the most influential figures of the early Texas Blues movement. His contributions to the early blues and his nurturing of Lowell Fulson, Lightning Hopkins and other legendary blues musicians insured that the blues would evolve and live on as an original American musical style. Fulson later inspired Ray Charles and Elvis Presley. Hopkins guitar styling was passed on to T-Bone Walker, Albert Collins and Stevie Ray Vaughan. The legacy of the "blues" in Texas and nationwide owes much to Alger "Texas" Alexander, and certainly his legacy deserves more than a simple gravestone in a long-forgotten Texas cemetery.⁽¹⁴⁾



Grave marker of Alger "Texas" Alexander

III. Significance

Algeron "Texas" Alexander is a "father" of the "Blues" in America. His pioneering contributions as a singer, creator and writer to the evolution of the "Blues" is recognized by most music authorities as a significant chapter in the history of popular song. Alexander actually insured the popularity and continuation of the "Blues" by teaching the musical style to numerous young Texas artists. Many tourists from Europe have made the journey to Montgomery County, Texas to visit Longstreet Cemetery to pay homage to the final resting place of Alger "Texas" Alexander. Buried in a lonesome spot, it would be nice to mark the cemetery for Texas and all of the world—to remind all of us that African Americans from Texas were a major factor in the early development of Blues music. Only Mississippi has more blues pioneers than Texas. None of them are in unmarked cemeteries.

To listen to some original recordings of Alger "Texas" Alexander, go to:

"The House of the Rising Sun" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNPvaHD6j-Y> (1928)

"Frost Texas Tornado Blues" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9cCE0vIm24> (1934)

"Easy Rider Blues" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxqhFZk_WXo (1934)

"Blue Devil Blues" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhpCM5n8S7I> (1928)

"No More Woman Blues" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhpCM5n8S7I> (1928)



Rare photo of Texas Alger

IV. Supporting Documentation

- (1) Library of Congress entry for Texas Alexander (<http://lccn.loc.gov/n88608075>)
- (2) arwulf arwulf, "Biography for Texas Alexander," AllMusic (<http://allmusic.com/artist/texas-alexander-mn0000031908/biography>)
- (3) Newspaper article from Jewett Historical Museum, Barbara Miles author (used with permission) (www.leoncountytoday.com). Oral family history from Ron Proctor of Richards, Texas, the grandnephew

of Texas Alexander. Blues valley: The Brazos Valley Music Scene: Blues masters by Russell Cushman (<http://brazosvalleyblues.blogspot.com/p/chapter-seven.html>)

(4) Tony Russell, "The Blues: from Robert Johnson to Robert Cray" (Carlton Books Ltd. 1997) ISBN 1-85868-255-X.

(5) All About the Blues, Texas Alexander -Texas and the Mississippi Sheiks document a local disaster (<http://www.allabouttheblues.com/texas-alexander/>) Everything2.com biography of Texas Alexander Jan. 2008 (http://everything2.com/index.pl?node_id=1539987)

(6) Sundayblues.org: <http://sundayblues.org/archives/tag/mississippi-mud-steppers>

(7) The Sojourners official site: <http://www.thesojourners.ca>

(8) Another Hot Oklahoma Night: a rock and roll story compiled by Larry O'Dell and Jeff Moore. Oklahoma Historical Society publishers 2009 ISBN 0-941498-76-X.

(9) Record request to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice-letter from Donna Pursley, open records legal assistant, office of the general counsel 1/6/2014 in possession of Coy Prather, record request to James Willet (jimwillet@sbcglobal.net), former warden and curator of the Texas prison museum

(10) Records request to Marvin Ann Patterson, Lamar County District Clerk (map@co.lamar.tx.us) No murder listed in index in history of Lamar County, in possession of Coy Prather

(11) Records request to Linda Shannon, District Court Clerk, Leon County, Centerville, Texas; (no records found) in possession of Coy Prather

(12) The Roots of Texas Music edited by Lawrence Clayton and Joe W. Specht, Texas A&M University Press 2003 ISBN 1-58544-221-6 pages 108-111.

(13) "Find a Grave"-Alger Alexander, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=6815329>

(14) James Head, "ALEXANDER, ALGER [TEXAS]," *Handbook of Texas Online*, (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fal83>), accessed January 25, 2015. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.