

# “Mosquito Moan”

by **Blind Lemon  
Jefferson**

ROBERT K. D. PETERSON

**M**osquitoes so vexed bluesman Blind Lemon Jefferson that he wrote a song about them. On 24 September 1929, he recorded the three-minute song “Mosquito Moan” for Paramount Records at Gennett Recording Studios in Richmond, Indiana. The song was recorded at his final recording session before he died at age 36.

Lemon Henry Jefferson was born on a farm in the now abandoned community of Couchman, near Wortham, Texas. His parents, Alex and Clarissa, were sharecroppers, and he was one of eight siblings. According to census records, he was born on 24 September 1893, but he indicated that he was born on 26 October 1894 on his 1917 draft registration. On the registration, he also revealed that he had been blind since birth, although the extent of his blindness is unclear; the best known photo of him shows him wearing eyeglasses.

In his early teens, Jefferson began playing guitar and performing as a street musician in several

rough-and-tumble East Texas towns. During the early 1910s, he often traveled north to Dallas to play with future blues giants Lead Belly and T-Bone Walker. In fact, Jefferson taught Walker how to play guitar in exchange for Walker’s services as the blind musician’s guide.

A recording scout discovered the portly Jefferson in 1925, and soon thereafter, he traveled to Chicago to make records with Paramount Records. He recorded 110 sides from 1926 to 1929 and became a nationally known blues artist while he was alive. He was among the first group of blues artists to record solo voice and guitar accompaniment, and many of his records were major hits with both black and white audiences, including “Matchbox Blues,” “See That My Grave Is Kept Clean,” and “Black Snake Moan.” His fingerpicking guitar style was intricate and his vocals were often high-pitched and powerfully loud. He fit the stereotype of a bluesman: he was fond of women and whiskey, but refused to play the blues on Sundays.



The song “Mosquito Moan” was released in January, 1930 on the flip side of the 78 rpm record with his song “Southern Woman Blues.” The song is traditional blues in the key of C, but pitched to B.

**The Lyrics**

I'm sittin' in my kitchen, mosquitoes all around my screen  
 I'm sittin' in my kitchen, mosquitoes all around my screen  
 I'm about all ready to get a mosquito bomb, I'll be  
 seldom seen

I must sleep under a tin tub, try my best to brad their bills  
 I believe I'll sleep under a tin tub, try my best to brad  
 their bills

Mosquitoes so bad in this man's town, keep me away from  
 my whiskey still

I love my whiskey better than some people likes to eat  
 I say I love my whiskey better than some people likes to eat  
 Mosquitoes bother me so I can hardly stay on my feet

Fig. 1. Photograph of Blind Lemon Jefferson. Note the tie that has been hand-drawn on the photograph.

I bought a spray last night and I sprayed all over my house  
 I bought a spray last night 'n' I sprayed all over my house  
 Mosquitoes all around my door won't leave nobody come out

Mosquitoes all around me, mosquitoes everywhere I go  
 Mosquitoes all around me, mosquitoes everywhere I go  
 No matter where I go, they sticks their bill in me

I would say gabbernipper, these gabbernipper bites  
 too hard

I would say gabbernipper, some gabbernipper bites  
 too hard

I stepped back in my kitchen and they springin' up in my  
 back yard

The first verse sets the stage. Jefferson is trapped in his house and he's contemplating drastic action to rid



Fig. 2. A 1930 advertisement, contemporary to Blind Lemon Jefferson's song, for Flit insecticide.

time were singing about bees, bed bugs, and boll weevils, but not mosquitoes. On the surface, the lyrics are humorous and only seem to be about Jefferson's battle with mosquitoes, but like many of the blues songs of the period, there is something else going on here. The mosquito in the song is a trickster, an animal figure often used in African-American story and song of the time to allude to cunning, humor, and deceit to obtain personal gain. In addition, the mosquitoes are metaphors for human tormentors, constantly dogging Jefferson as he tries to live his life in early twentieth-century America. This is most apparent in the fifth verse: "Mosquitoes all around me, mosquitoes everywhere I go; No matter where I go, they sticks their bill in me."

Blind Lemon Jefferson did not live to see the release of his song. He died in Chicago on 19 December 1929, probably of a heart attack, after becoming disoriented during a snowstorm. Paramount Records paid for his body to be returned to Texas by train, and he was buried at Wortham Negro Cemetery. The name of the cemetery was changed to Blind Lemon Memorial Cemetery in 2007.

Unlike many of his other songs, "Mosquito Moan" has rarely been covered by other artists. Blues artist Paul Geremia covered the song on his 2004 album *Love, Murder & Mosquitos*, but Blind Lemon Jefferson's place in American musical history is secure. He is widely considered the father of the Texas blues sound, and he influenced many contemporary and subsequent blues, country, and rock artists, such as Lead Belly, T-Bone Walker, Lightnin' Hopkins, B. B. King, Albert King, Jimmie Rodgers, Doc Watson, and Carl Perkins.

### Discography

**Blind Lemon Jefferson.** Mosquito Moan. Paramount, Pm-12899. 1930.

**Robert K. D. Peterson** (bpeterson@montana.edu) is Professor of Entomology at Montana State University, Bozeman, where he leads research and teaching programs in Biological Risk Assessment and Insect Ecology.

himself of the mosquitoes. The second verse uses the term "brad their bills," which has been misinterpreted by some as "grab their bills." The term "bill" refers to the female mosquito's proboscis, or sucking mouthparts. The term "brad their bills" means that Jefferson hopes the tin tub he's sleeping under will bend their bills so they will no longer be able to suck his blood. Here, "brad" refers (in verb form) to a small nail with an irregular head. The end of the second verse and the entire third verse refer to Jefferson's love of hard liquor at the height of Prohibition. We learn why he is so bothered by mosquitoes: they are preventing him from getting to his whiskey still. The fourth verse has him spraying for mosquitoes in his house, but the last line tells us it is futile because many more are waiting outside his door. The fifth verse reinforces the fact that no matter how hard he tries, the mosquitoes will continue to vex him. The sixth and final verse uses the term "gabberneripper," which is not commonly used today. "Gabberneripper" or "gallinipper" is a southern U.S. term for a large mosquito or crane fly.

We will never know why Jefferson chose to write a song about mosquitoes. Other blues artists at the