

DEFORD BAILEY

COUNTRY'S 'HARMONICA WIZARD'

DeFord Bailey was one of country music's most significant African American performers. Bailey was a musician—not a singer—and his instrument was the harmonica, or “harp,” as he called it.

Born in rural Smith County, Tennessee, on December 14, 1899, Bailey's father's grandparents were freed slaves. His mother's grandparents owned the land they farmed. Bailey's mother died when he was a year old, and he was raised by an aunt and uncle. At age three, he contracted polio, a crippling and often fatal disease. For almost a year, he could move only his arms and neck. His aunt gave him his first harmonica, and he taught himself how to play, passing the time using the instrument to mimic the sounds—such as howling dogs and passing trains—he heard outside his bedroom window. He recovered, but the illness stunted his growth: he stood four-foot-ten as an adult.

Many members of Bailey's family were musicians, and they played what he called “black hillbilly music” at community gatherings. Bailey had a musical ear and learned songs easily. He moved to Nashville at age nineteen and worked odd jobs, playing the harmonica in his off-hours. A radio station operator heard him, and Bailey first performed on radio station WDAD in 1925. The next year, Nashville's WSM invited him to play on its barn dance show, renamed the Grand Ole Opry a year later. By then, Bailey—nicknamed the “Harmonica Wizard”—was one of the Opry's most popular performers. In his song, “Pan American Blues,” Bailey imitated the sound of a train.



In the 1930s, Bailey went out on tour, even in the South, where racial prejudice was common. The crowds loved his harmonica playing, but many were surprised to discover that he was black. Segregation laws often forced Bailey to eat his meals in restaurant kitchens and sleep in a car rather than a hotel.

The Opry fired Bailey in 1941, though the reason remains unclear. Opry host “Judge” George D. Hay said it was because Bailey refused to learn new music. Bailey rarely performed in public after leaving the Opry. Instead, he supported his wife and three children with a shoeshine business in Nashville.

Bailey's contributions were honored again in the 1960s when African American performer Charley Pride became a well-known country artist. In 1974, Bailey was invited to perform on the Opry; he returned to that stage three more times before his death on July 2, 1982, at the age of eighty-two. He was elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2005.

SOURCES

Behind the Grand Ole Opry Curtain: Tales of Romance and Tragedy by the Grand Ole Opry and Robert K. Oermann; *Country Music, U.S.A.* by Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal; *DeFord Bailey: A Black Star in Early Country Music* by David C. Morton and Charles K. Wolfe; *Encyclopedia of Country Music*