

NORTH CAROLINIANS *of* NOTE

Fulton 'Blind Boy Fuller' Allen *Blues musician*

By *Dasia Robinson*

Born on July 10, 1907, in Wadesboro, Fulton "Blind Boy Fuller" Allen became one of the most influential blues musicians of his era. Despite his inability to see, he was a talented guitarist and vocalist.

"The fluidity of his singing and the intricacy of his guitar playing matched in a way that made his music compelling," says Glenn Hinson, associate professor of anthropology and American studies at the UNC-Chapel Hill.

Allen's music

Throughout most of his career, Allen was a street musician. He performed popular music of the day, gospel music and original songs and described himself as a bluesman and a songster.

American Recording Company (ARC) signed Allen to a record deal in 1936, six years before his death in 1941. In that time, he recorded 135 songs.

A master of styles such as ragtime, pop and blues, Allen created music that was distinguished by his use of a steel guitar. His influence and early playing paved the way for other musicians to replicate his style and flourish in the music industry.

"The quickness of his finger-picking, the dancibility of his songs and the rag-timey nature of his music became a standard throughout the region," Hinson says. "People attempted to copy his songs note by note."

"Rag Mama Rag," "Trucking My Blues Away" and "Step It Up and Go" were popular songs that continue to survive Allen.

"Allen's music achieved a type of national popularity that kept him coming to the recording studio," Hinson says.

Allen's short career earned him a legacy that lives on almost 71 years after his death.

Allen's life

Allen's family and early life remain a mystery to the public because neither was well documented.

In 1995, Bruce Bastin, a folklorist and expert on east coast blues, wrote the book "Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in

the Southeast." In his book, he devotes a chapter to Allen's life and his humble beginnings. Allen was one of 10 children born to Calvin and Mary Jane Allen.

During Allen's childhood, he was the only boy in his family to learn how to play guitar. His sister Ethel learned how to play the guitar and was described by their family as the better player. As a child, Allen always had problems with his eyesight. In the 1920s, Allen's mother died. His father relocated the family to Rockingham.

Allen met his wife, Cora Mae Martin, in Rockingham. In 1927, at 19, Allen married Martin, who was 14. With his young bride, Allen moved to Winston-Salem and began working as a laborer in the coal yards.

As Allen grew older, he began having more serious sight problems. A physician in Charlotte diagnosed him with snow blindness because of ulcers in his eyes. Although the diagnosis was not good, Allen left the physician with hope that his sight would not get worse.

But in 1928, he lost his vision. Allen was completely blind by age 20. He depended heavily on his young wife and chose to be a street musician to support her.

With a fourth-grade education, "there weren't many options available for a disabled, not skilled, African-American living in the Jim Crow south," Hinson says.

Hinson describes Durham as a place where street musicians were able to make money.

"Fuller became a part of a wonderfully rich music community," Hinson says. "Durham was a place where musicians who played the blues came because it offered a community of established African-Americans who could afford to invest back into the community."

Fuller's skills catapulted him to notoriety in Durham, the region and the nation.

"Allen had a reputation for being able to get around Durham without a guide," Hinson says. "He took advantage of his skills. Allen figured out early that playing music was his way to shine, and he wanted to rise above other musicians."

Allen earned money and a reputation by playing on the streets and private parties,



Southern Folklife Collection, UNC-Chapel Hill

and participating in talent competitions.

In 1934, James Baxter 'Jim' Long hosted a talent competition. Here, Allen met Long.

Long was the manager of one of the United Dollar Stores and recording scout for the ARC who helped Allen get a recording deal. Long and Allen traveled to New York City, where Allen recorded music. As a marketing strategy, Long gave Allen the nickname Blind Boy Fuller.

"Long served as the liaison between music groups and the ARC," Hinson explains. "He helped figure out which songs would be recorded and set up the recording sessions."

Although his songs reached national success, Allen still played music on the streets.

Despite having popular songs, Allen did not receive much recognition for his music during his lifetime, nor did he become very wealthy. "Musicians were paid a flat fee for their songs," Hinson says. "There were no royalties on songs during this time."

On Feb. 13, 1941, Allen died at age 33 from a bacterial infection due to complications from bladder surgery. He was buried on Feb. 15, 1941 in Durham.

In 2001, the state and the Durham Historical Society honored him as one of 100 most influential people from North Carolina.

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Interview: Glenn Hinson, ghinson@email.unc.edu.

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