**BHM 2024 Theme: Arts & Entertainment (A&E)**

**DeFord Bailey:** American [country music](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Country_music) and [blues](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blues) star

**DeFord Bailey** (December 14, 1899 – July 2, 1982)[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DeFord_Bailey%22%20%5Cl%20%22cite_note-Wolfe-4) was an American [country music](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Country_music) and [blues](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blues) star from the 1920s until 1941. He was one of the first performers to be introduced on Nashville radio station [WSM](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WSM_%28AM%29)'s [Grand Ole Opry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Ole_Opry),[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DeFord_Bailey#cite_note-Quote-5) the [first African-American](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_African-American) performer to appear on the show, and the first performer to have his music recorded in Nashville.[[6]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DeFord_Bailey#cite_note-Tennessean-6) Bailey played several instruments in his career but is best known for playing the [harmonica](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harmonica), often being referred to as a "harmonica wizard".

Born and raised in Tennessee, Bailey learned how to play the harmonica while recuperating from polio as a young child. He moved to Nashville with relatives in his late teens and was an important early contributor to Nashville's burgeoning music industry. Among the first generation of entertainers to perform live on the radio, his recorded compositions were well-known and popular.

Bailey toured and performed with many well-known country artists during the 1930s. As a result of the 1941 royalties disagreement between [Broadcast Music, Inc.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Broadcast_Music%2C_Inc.) (BMI) and [American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Society_of_Composers%2C_Authors_and_Publishers) (ASCAP), he was fired by WSM and stopped making his living as an entertainer. Afterwards, he supported himself and his family by shining shoes and renting out rooms in his home. He returned to sporadic public performances in 1974 when he was invited to participate in the Opry's first Old-Timers show and in 2005 was posthumously inducted into the [Country Music Hall of Fame](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Country_Music_Hall_of_Fame).

**Early life**

A grandson of slaves,[[7]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DeFord_Bailey%22%20%5Cl%20%22cite_note-BlackHistory-7) Bailey was born on December 14, 1899,[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DeFord_Bailey#cite_note-Wolfe-4) near the Bellwood community in [Smith County, Tennessee](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smith_County%2C_Tennessee).[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DeFord_Bailey#cite_note-Country_Music_Hall_of_Fame-2)[[8]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DeFord_Bailey#cite_note-FOOTNOTEMortonWolfe199315-8) His mother died when he was about a year old and he was then taken in by his aunt Barbara Lou. He learned to play the [harmonica](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harmonica) at the age of three[[7]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DeFord_Bailey#cite_note-BlackHistory-7)[[8]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DeFord_Bailey#cite_note-FOOTNOTEMortonWolfe199315-8) when he contracted [polio](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poliomyletis).[[8]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DeFord_Bailey#cite_note-FOOTNOTEMortonWolfe199315-8) Bailey was confined to bed for a year and could only move his head and arms. His style of playing the harmonica evolved, as he imitated the sounds of the natural world around him and of the trains traveling through the countryside.[[9]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DeFord_Bailey#cite_note-9) Though Bailey did recover from his bout with polio, there were some long-term consequences. His back remained slightly misshapen and he only grew to be 4 feet, 10 inches. He was so short and slender as a teenager he was mistaken to be an underage child by railroad ticket agents.[[10]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DeFord_Bailey#cite_note-FOOTNOTEMortonWolfe199316,_32,_39-10) His foster father Clark Odom was hired as a manager for a farm near Nashville and in 1908 the family made the move from Smith County.[[11]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DeFord_Bailey#cite_note-FOOTNOTEMortonWolfe199322%E2%80%9323-11) The Odoms and their foster son lived on Nashville and Franklin Tennessee farms Clark Odom managed for several years. In 1918, the family moved to Nashville when Clark Odom got a city job and Bailey started to perform locally there as an amateur. **(read more):**

[**https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DeFord\_Bailey**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DeFord_Bailey)