



Student Name:

Class Period:

Date:

Meet the Originals

Texas Originals is a radio series about people who made an impact on Texas. You can hear it online and on radio stations around the state. Read or listen to the episode on Julius Bledsoe. Then, answer questions about it.

Julius Bledsoe 1897–1943

The singer who first performed the song “Ol’ Man River” is an obscure figure today. Baritone Julius Bledsoe was among the first African Americans to appear on Broadway, but he made few recordings and his fame was soon eclipsed by the great Paul Robeson, who succeeded him in the role of Joe in the classic musical *Show Boat*.

Bledsoe was born in Waco around 1897 and attended Bishop College in Marshall. He took voice lessons while studying medicine at Columbia University in the early 1920s and made his professional debut at New York’s Aeolian Hall in 1924. Three years later, Bledsoe appeared in the original production of *Show Boat*. A critic from the New York Morning Telegraph described him as “a singer who can pick the heart right out of your body—if you don’t look out.”

Bledsoe was a composer as well. His song cycle *African Suite* premiered in Amsterdam in 1936, and he wrote an opera based on the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In the forties, Bledsoe had minor roles in films, including *Santa Fe Trail* and *Western Union*.

Bledsoe died in 1943 and is buried in Waco. His tombstone is inscribed with a line from “Ol’ Man River,” the song that made him a star—“He just keeps rollin’ along.”

Check for Understanding: Answer the questions below based on evidence from the episode on Julius Bledsoe. Refer to the text included above if needed.

1. Julius Bledsoe became one of the first African Americans to do what?
2. The episode describes Bledsoe as an “obscure figure.” Why is he not well remembered today?

Going Further: Write or discuss your answer to the question below, supporting your answer with evidence from the episode or additional information you have learned in class.

3. **Making Inferences.** The episode says that Bledsoe took voice lessons while in medical school at Columbia in the 1920s. Based on his career as a singer and actor, what might you conclude about Bledsoe’s career choice?