

WOMAN WITH GUITAR

MEMPHIS MINNIE'S BLUES



PAUL & BETH GARON

WITH A FOREWORD BY JIM O'NEAL

WOMAN WITH GUITAR

MEMPHIS MINNIE'S BLUES

Revised and Expanded Edition

Paul Garon and Beth Garon

Foreword by Jim O'Neal



City Lights Books * San Francisco

TECHNICAL NOTE

Minnie's rushed and compressed delivery presents a number of problems, not the least of which is the number of words that exist somewhere short of articulation, in the vicinity of the implicit and the suggested. Often a word like "you" is only broached with a barely detectable "y" sound, and we are faced with the choice of rendering it "you" or "y", or ignoring it entirely. This difficulty leads to another. Rather than print lyrics in pseudo-dialect, we have chosen not to attempt to render every aspect of Minnie's (or any singer's) accent. But this decision puts even more strain on the question of the words whose first syllable is barely articulated, if that. There is no ideal solution to this problem, but we feel our quoted texts accurately represent the songs.

We use a standard method of transcribing verses where the first two lines are alike or similar by adding a "(2x)" at the end of the first line, and following it with the third line thus:

I found my rooster this morning by looking at his comb.
(2x)
You can look out now, pullets, it won't be long.

This method ignores the idiosyncrasies that occur between Minnie's various renderings of the same line, where line two is of the form, "awwwwww, by looking at his comb," but it is otherwise textually faithful. Further, the (2x) system became an economic necessity for a book of this size. All songs appearing in the text without an author credit are by Memphis Minnie.

In all cases, "harp" refers to harmonica.

Lights

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction to the New Edition *11*

Foreword *13*

Part I The Life *23*

1. The Heroine *25*
2. Woman with Guitar: The Rise of Memphis Minnie *29*
3. Southern Nights *35*
4. Chicago Days *57*
5. Me and My Chauffeur *73*
6. "I Drink Anywhere I Please" *93*

Part II The Songs *135*

7. "The Best Thing Goin'" *137*
8. To Make Heard the Interior Voice *143*
9. Bumble Bee *155*
10. Crime *167*
11. Dirt Dauber Blues *183*
12. Doctors and Disease *193*
13. Doors *213*
14. Dirty Dozens *219*
15. Duets *227*
16. Food and Cooking *241*
17. Horses *249*
18. Trains and Travel *257*
19. Mad Love *279*
20. Work *289*

Appendices 307

Locations of Memphis Minnie Nightclub

Performances 309

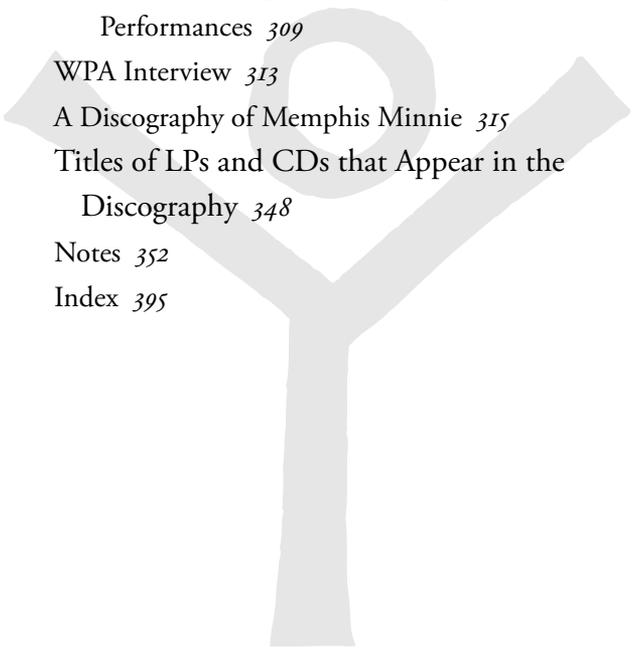
WPA Interview 313

A Discography of Memphis Minnie 315

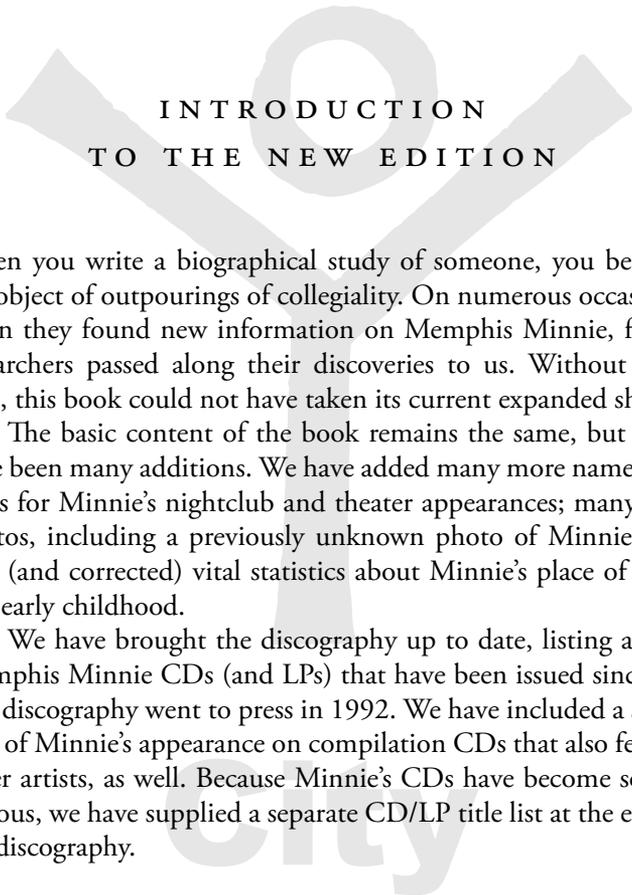
Titles of LPs and CDs that Appear in the
Discography 348

Notes 352

Index 395



City Lights



INTRODUCTION
TO THE NEW EDITION

When you write a biographical study of someone, you become the object of outpourings of collegiality. On numerous occasions, when they found new information on Memphis Minnie, fellow researchers passed along their discoveries to us. Without their help, this book could not have taken its current expanded shape.

The basic content of the book remains the same, but there have been many additions. We have added many more names and dates for Minnie's nightclub and theater appearances; many new photos, including a previously unknown photo of Minnie; and new (and corrected) vital statistics about Minnie's place of birth and early childhood.

We have brought the discography up to date, listing all the Memphis Minnie CDs (and LPs) that have been issued since the first discography went to press in 1992. We have included a selection of Minnie's appearance on compilation CDs that also feature other artists, as well. Because Minnie's CDs have become so numerous, we have supplied a separate CD/LP title list at the end of the discography.

Lights

FOREWORD

The iconic status now accorded Memphis Minnie as a feminist symbol and female potentate in a man's world is nothing new to the corps of devotees that had already developed by the time *Woman with Guitar* was first published in 1992. But she is far more widely recognized as a heroine now than when she was known mainly among hardcore blues collectors and among musicians and audiences who knew of her during her performing years. I would argue that much of this new adulation can be traced back to *Woman with Guitar*. While the number of people who actually read the book and took up her cause may have been only a few thousand, Paul and Beth Garon's treatise became exponentially important to a more general readership and music-buying audience, especially as the digital age progressed. *Woman with Guitar* served as a source point for reviewers (of the book and of her CDs), for liner note writers of the many CD compilations that have since appeared, and ultimately for the half a million hits that a Google search for the name Memphis Minnie will now yield on the Internet. And the analytical discussions in the book have also opened more minds to probe what lies beneath the lyrics Minnie sang, to try to interpret and appreciate her songs (and indeed blues songs in general) in the contexts of creativity, imagination and poetic freedom. In the majesty and passion of her art, the blues could be a pathway to the heart or an incantation of desire. It could be a weapon in the war against race and gender prejudice, it could be a claim to free will. It could imbue the mundane with magic, it could conjoin the real with the surreal.



The same digital information network that has propelled awareness of Memphis Minnie's music and her story from *Woman with Guitar* has also opened a window, limited as it may be—to print sources of the past that once seemed all but lost to us, to the world of Minnie's heyday as a performer. When *Woman with Guitar* was first published, Google, amazon.com, allmusic.com, ancestry.com, Facebook and Youtube did not exist. Today ample material on blues is accessible through such Internet resources and books, specialist blues magazines, and newspaper archives.

Yet it is still true, as the authors note in chapter 1, that, considering Minnie's significance in blues, "surprisingly little documentation exists for so extensive a career." In a survey of vintage newspapers and magazines undertaken to contribute new material for this edition of *Women with Guitar*, I did find her records advertised in numerous periodicals, as well as club appearances publicized primarily in the *Chicago Defender*. But despite her obvious popularity as a recording artist and live entertainer, there was little coverage of Minnie as a personality, and no analysis of her songs beyond short record reviews. During her decades as an active performer, no newspaper or magazine even reported as much as her age, birth date or home town. Not even Langston Hughes, an obvious admirer who wrote an evocative *Defender* review of a Minnie performance, bothered to gather specific details of her life. Her first published biographies, brief but significant, appear to have been published in French, in *Dictionnaire du Jazz* by Hugues Panassié and Madeleine Gautier (1954)¹ and in *Big Bill Blues* (1955) by Big Bill Broonzy and Yannick Bruynoghe, when Minnie's career was nearing its end. Onah Spencer submitted a one-page typewritten bio on Minnie as part of the *Illinois Writers Project Negro Music Survey*, dated August 1, 1939, but this apparently was never published until now. (see WPA Interview in appendices).

While the lives, recordings and careers of blues artists both famous and obscure have been documented in obsessive detail over the past several decades, in Memphis Minnie's day, blues artists weren't accorded anywhere near this degree of biographical scrutiny. It was once rare to even see a photo or a news account of a black entertainer in the general daily press and popular magazines

largely written by and for white communities. The class-conscious African American press promoted nationally successful black entertainers with a polished uptown image, such as Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Fats Waller, Nat “King” Cole, Louis Jordan, Count Basie, Jimmie Lunceford, the Mills Brothers and the Ink Spots—not coincidentally the same acts, by and large, that came to enjoy some degree of crossover popularity with whites. Scant editorial coverage was allotted blues singers of the downhome southern or Chicago variety. But such papers were apparently happy to accept advertisements for records or club appearances by the likes of Minnie, Big Bill Broonzy, Sonny Boy Williamson, Big Maceo and Tampa Red.

In Minnie’s case, the primary print outlet was the *Chicago Defender*. During the 1920s the *Defender* was loaded with ads for records by blues artists ranging from Bessie Smith and Ida Cox to Charley Patton and Blind Lemon Jefferson, often colorfully illustrated with drawings by white ad designers. Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe had the misfortune to begin recording just as the Depression was about to hit, resulting in a drastic cutback in record company advertising. So only a few of their records were advertised in the *Defender* (and some other black papers, including the *New York Amsterdam News* and the *Baltimore Afro-American*) in 1929–1930. After the Depression the record labels rarely advertised individual releases in newspapers any more, although record stores did often publish lists of the latest hits for sale in local papers. By the 1940s the national trade publication, *Billboard*, had become the major print medium for record label marketing (soon joined by *Cash Box*).

The Memphis Minnie records that were advertised in the *Defender* in the 1940s were listed along with numerous other releases in ads placed by record stores, usually mail-order houses based in Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, or New York. What the *Defender* did print, from at least 1941 on, were ads for Minnie’s Chicago club appearances at the Cotton Club, Martin’s Corner, Frost’s Corner, Joe’s Rendezvous Lounge, and other nightspots, sometimes augmented by short news blurbs and occasional photos promoting her appearances (such items probably coming as part of the sales packages offered advertisers). The ads

appeared in the paper's local edition but the national edition carried occasional news.

News about Minnie was occasionally mentioned in other *Defender* reports, including her 1936 stint performing on an excursion boat, appearances in Columbus, Ohio, in 1937, and Ocala, Florida, in 1946, and a fete in her honor in Chicago in 1946.²

The Columbus report also noted "She hails from Chicago's radioland"—a rare reference to an intriguing but so far little-documented phase of Minnie's career when she was broadcasting live on the popular *Red Hot and Low Down* program (which aired on WCFL, WJJD and WAAF at various times from at least 1932 to 1938 and again on WCFL in 1941–42, according to radio logs from the *Chicago Tribune*. (These stations offered a variety of general-interest programming; black-oriented stations were still some years away at this point.) *Red Hot and Low Down* is also mentioned in Onah Spencer's 1939 notes on Minnie. The regular host of *Red Hot and Low Down* was Bob Hawk, who later gained national fame hosting quiz shows on the CBS radio network.³ Information on blues artists who appeared on the program is spotty, but another may have been Kokomo Arnold, who was advertised as an "Internationally Famous Radio and Decca Recording Artist" in a July 9, 1938 *Defender* ad. (Minnie also later performed on KFFA in Helena, Arkansas, and WDIA in Memphis, according to Brewer Phillips. See p. 108.)

Minnie's music was also featured in record reviews in the *Defender* and other papers, notably in "Rating the Records," a column by the African-American poet and writer Frank Marshall Davis syndicated by the Associated Negro Press (ANP). Davis's column, later headed "Keeping Up with the Discs," also appeared in the *Atlanta Daily World*, *Cleveland Call & Post*, *Baltimore Afro-American*, *Philadelphia Tribune*, *California Eagle*, and other black newspapers. Davis reviewed a wide range of music, both black and white, and though blues may not have been his favorite genre, his knowledge of blues records seemed well grounded and he deemed blues important enough to include in regular fashion. He was reviewing Minnie's records as early as the June 12, 1939, edition of the *Daily World*, praising *Low Down Blues* on Vocalion in a paragraph headed "Cellar Stuff" as "Another top-notch 'race

record' . . . full of belly laughs." In his August 21, 1941, column, printed in the *Philadelphia Tribune*, Davis wrote: "Memphis Minnie, who sings mean blues, gets her thumping rhythm going on the Okeh recording of *Me and My Chauffeur Blues* and *Can't Afford to Lose My Man*. She shows good sense on the second side." But in a November 1 piece in the *Baltimore Afro-American* he opined: "Memphis Minnie has done better than on her Okeh recording of *In My Girlish Days* and *My Gage Is Going Up*."

Oddly enough, another singer who used the name Memphis Minnie—Minnie Wallace, who recorded for Victor on September 23, 1929, accompanied by members of the Memphis Jug Band, followed by sessions for Vocalion in 1935—proved more newsworthy, to some publications, for writing a song about a convicted murderer. Wallace penned "Trigger Slim Blues" about a Memphis gunman, James Goodlin, whose crimes had achieved recent notoriety. Jimmie Gordon recorded the song for Decca on June 4, 1940. Reporters for the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* and *Delta Democrat-Times* who talked to Wallace published more biographical information about her (a preacher's daughter, in Port Gibson, Mississippi, and a resident of Greenville before moving to Memphis) than anyone did about our Memphis Minnie at the time.⁴ Neither paper noted the existence of a more famous Memphis Minnie; if they knew of her at all, they may have assumed she and Minnie Wallace (who recorded only under her own name, never as Memphis Minnie) were the same. The name Memphis Minnie, as a character in plays, actually preceded its appearance on Memphis Minnie's records.)⁵

So it remained the tavern and the phonograph record that provided that the contexts for Minnie's contemporary press coverage. The jukebox, a medium of both the tavern and the record, became the defining factor in *Billboard's* approach to music. Whereas newspaper reviews were consumer-oriented, *Billboard* rated records in terms of their appeal to jukebox operators. And Minnie's records were highly rated as likely to bring "coinage to the race locations." She was even hailed as "the outstanding race blues singer of the day" in one review. Just to sample excerpts from a few reviews:

Me and My Chauffeur Blues/Can't Afford to Lose My Man: "In the race register, the blues singing of Memphis Minnie always

makes for coin machine magic at the Harlem spots.” (January 30, 1943)

Looking the World Over: “Operators servicing the out-and-out race business have a natural in Memphis Minnie’s *Looking the World Over*. The outstanding race singer of the day, Miss Minnie again impresses with her blues chant that tells how she sowed her wild oats, and now that she has had her fun is ready to settle down with her man.” (February 20, 1943)

I’m So Glad/Mean Mistreater Blues: “It’s top in race shouting that Memphis Minnie delivers, singing it way deep down and phrasing it blue as the guitar and string bass beat out a throbbing rhythmic accompaniment for her own selections.” (May 3, 1947)

Fish Man Blues: “An old hand at shouting out the backbiting race blues, Memphis Minnie stirs up plenty of excitement with her sultry and salty singing here. With a terrific rock to her chant, and the accompanying guitar, bass and drums pounding out a driving rhythm, gal spins out a blues classic for *Fish Man Blues* in which she tells her man to hold off his bait . . . Race spots will shower coin pieces on this platter, particularly for *Fish Man Blues*.” (September 13, 1947)

While *Billboard*’s reviews indicated sales potential for Minnie’s records, the discs never sold quite well enough for her to make the magazine’s charts for “race” or rhythm & blues records, which only began in October 1942 as the Harlem Hit Parade, leaving the earlier years of blues releases in uncharted territory.

In reconstructing blues history, researchers have relied heavily on the *Defender* and other black papers as well as *Billboard* when seeking what press coverage there was of blues artists. But with the advances in digitalization and microfilming, ads and record reviews have come to the light from a far-flung variety of daily and weekly local newspapers revealing that, while many readers may not have known Minnie’s music well if at all, a substantial general (primarily white) readership at least saw Minnie’s name in print.

In a series of ads that ran on the “Farm News” pages of a number of small weeklies in Texas and Oklahoma from August 1930 to May 1931, Brunswick branches in Dallas and Kansas City advertised more records by Minnie (on Vocalion) than by any other artist, black or white. Leroy Carr’s Vocalion discs were

also regularly listed in the ads, which sometimes also advertised blues by Charley Jordan, Peetie Wheatstraw, Lee Green, Robert Wilkins, Lucille Bogan, Funny Paper Smith and others, along with gospel, pop, jazz and hillbilly releases and a picture of a Brunswick portable phonograph in every ad. These ads, in the Columbus (Texas) *Colorado Citizen*, the Hearne (Texas) *Democrat*, the Eufala (Oklahoma) *Indian Journal* and others, directed buyers simply to “Brunswick and Vocalion Dealers” and also solicited “Responsible Merchants” from areas where the company had no dealers.⁶

Advertising for records hit its lowest point during the remainder of the 1930s. But, with a boost from the wartime and early postwar economy, many music shops and other stores that carried records, including furniture dealers, jewelers, and department stores, actively advertised beginning in early 1945. Minnie’s Columbia releases were listed in store ads in such diverse periodicals as the *Canton (Ohio) Repository*, *Naugatuck (Connecticut) Daily News*, *Council Bluffs (Iowa) Nonpareil*, *Las Cruces (New Mexico) Sun-News*, *Anniston (Alabama) Star* and *Charleston (West Virginia) Daily News*. These stores listed a number of releases in each ad—pop, country, jazz and classical, with typically only a few blues, if any. Sometimes Minnie was the only blues artist listed in ads alongside Frank Sinatra, Perry Como and Harry James. The widespread coverage was evidence of Minnie’s status as a top Columbia artist and of the broad reach of Columbia’s major-label distribution. Columbia also included Minnie in ads promoting its roster in the entertainment trade magazine *Variety* in the 1940s.

Columbia and other labels also provided review copies to newspapers. While *Billboard* and the Associated Negro Press affiliates reviewed Minnie’s records most frequently, again her records occasionally popped up in the mainstream press, including some major outlets. Sometimes the releases were merely listed but some reviewers also offered opinions. The *Chicago Tribune*, no less, noted *Cherry Ball* and *I Don’t Want No Woman I Have to Give My Money To* by Kansas Joe & Memphis Minnie on November 30, 1930, along with other Vocalion and Brunswick records by Robert Wilkins, Joe Callicott and Lee Green.⁷ On November 14, 1935, the *San Antonio Light* recognized her *Joe Louis Strut* as an example of recent songs with topical themes.⁸ Minnie made the

Tribune again on March 25, 1945, when critic Will Davidson enthused, “There is an art to appreciating good blues singing, but how can you miss the strange appeal of Minnie in *When You Love Me* or *Love Come and Go*?”⁹ Columbia evidently put extra promotional push behind this Okeh single as part of its first batch of releases upon the lifting of a record ban imposed by the American Federation of Musicians in 1942.¹⁰ It was also reviewed in the *New York Herald Tribune* (by music critic Paul Bowles, a noted novelist and composer), *Times-Picayune, New Orleans States, Cleveland Plain Dealer* and *Greensboro Daily News*.¹¹

A scattering of ads and news items from 1946 help track Minnie’s touring that year, perhaps booked by Ferguson Brothers of Indianapolis, a leading agency in the representation of black entertainers of the era. Her appearance in Ocala, Florida, on June 8, was publicized in the black press, including the *Defender* and *Pittsburgh Courier*, while other ads appeared in local daily newspapers including the *Augusta (Georgia) Chronicle, Kokomo (Indiana) Tribune* and *Danville (Virginia) Bee* for concerts in those cities.¹² In several ads, in Chicago and on tour dates, the billing was to “Memphis Minnie and Her Electric Guitar,” her amplified instrument already having been documented as a strong element of her live shows by Langston Hughes’s *Defender* review of her show at the 230 Club. An October 7, 1944, Martin’s Corner *Defender* ad touted her as “Master of Electric Guitar.” It raises the question of how much more powerful her live performance sound may have been than on her studio recordings; likewise, several 1946 tour dates advertised her with Leo Hines’s fourteen-piece orchestra, a configuration that was never captured in her recording sessions. Occasional ads and articles prove, or sometimes at least suggest, that she was also performing for white or mixed audiences, presumably on the excursion steamer mentioned in the *Defender* in 1936, at black and tan clubs, on her 1946 concert tour where separate white seating was advertised in Virginia, and at Schindler’s Theatre in Chicago in 1951, where she was advertised in the December 22 *Defender* as “Queen of the Blues.” A *Chicago Tribune* notice of November 9, 1952, indicates that the folk music movement was attuned to her music as well, as she took Big Bill Broonzy’s place at a “Come for to Sing” program at the Blue Note.

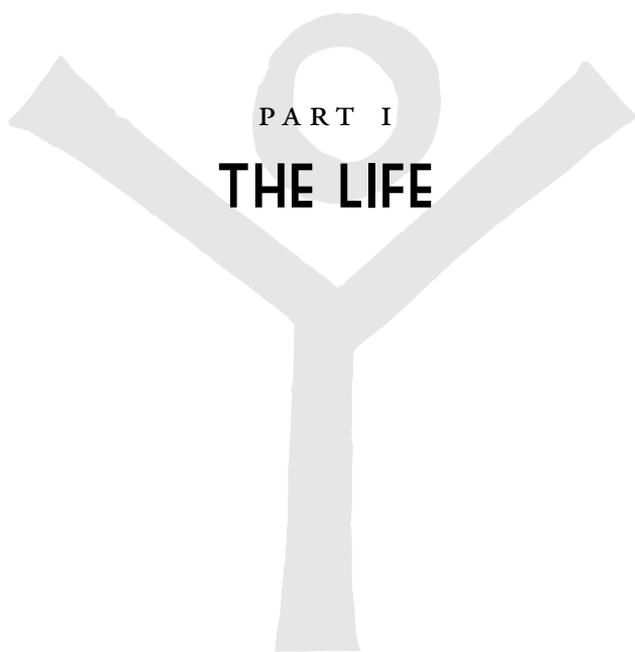
During her post-Columbia career Minnie's presence in the press declined, although *Billboard* did continue to cover her releases on Regal, Checker and J.O.B., and her Chicago appearances were still advertised for a few years in the *Defender*. Just as her star was waning with the black American blues audience, European blues enthusiasts began writing about her. Georges Adins from Belgium corresponded with her prior to visiting her in Memphis in 1962, resulting in a 1963 article in *R and B Panorama*. He, along with Big Bill Broonzy and Yannick Bruynoghe, may have supplied Hugues Panassié with information for the Memphis Minnie entry in *Dictionnaire du Jazz* in 1954. Adins's article and a Mike Leadbitter piece in the British journal *Blues Unlimited* provided much of the framework for Minnie's biography as we know it.

In the United States, jazz critic Leonard Feather, a British transplant, included a short entry on Minnie in the *New Edition of the Encyclopedia of Jazz* in 1960 (after omitting her from the first edition) but it seems entirely based on Broonzy's book. Following Minnie's stroke and retirement there was little written about her in the American press in the 1960s, although on May 25, 1968, her hometown *Memphis Commercial Appeal* reported on a gathering organized in her honor by local aficionado Harry Godwin at the nursing home where Minnie resided (see p. 139).

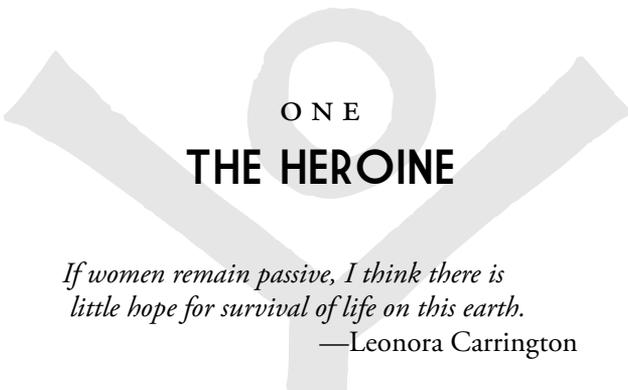
This sampling of Memphis Minnie in the press represents only what a few blues researchers have found over the years along with recent results of digital searches of newspaper archives on genealogy web sites. Undoubtedly as more and more newspapers are microfilmed and digitized, there will be more to discover about Memphis Minnie and her music. But with what we already know we can better appreciate the broader national scope of her fame and her importance, and the special appeal of a remarkable "Woman with Guitar."

—Jim O'Neal, January 2014

(Thanks to Rob Ford, Robert Pruter, Scott Dirks and Frank Hoffman's *Jazz Advertised in the Negro Press* for information on articles and ads, and to Elin Peltz for Library of Congress copyright research. Thanks also to Vicente P. Zumel for research assistance.)



City Lights



ONE
THE HEROINE

*If women remain passive, I think there is
little hope for survival of life on this earth.*

—Leonora Carrington

Who was Memphis Minnie? She may be relatively unknown to the general public, but among blues fans, her feats are legendary: “Memphis Minnie was one of the greatest blues singers of all time,” said *Living Blues* magazine.¹

In a 1973 obituary, one critic called her “the most popular female country blues singer,”² while *Blues Who’s Who* quotes another commentator who stated, “Memphis Minnie was without doubt the greatest of all female singers to record.”³

Many blues artists date an entire era in their lives by referring to her. As Koko Taylor said, “the first blues record I ever heard was *Me and My Chauffeur Blues*, by Memphis Minnie.”⁴ Hound Dog Taylor, speaking of his early days in Chicago in 1943–1944, noted that “47th Street was jumping on the South Side. When I first come up Memphis Minnie was playing at the old 708 Club with her first husband.”⁵ When Baby Boy Warren looked back on the singers who influenced him the most and for whom he had the most respect, he commented, “The other musician I admired [besides Little Buddy Doyle] was a woman—Memphis Minnie.”⁶ And Bukka White reminisced, “Memphis Minnie, Washboard Sam, Tampa Red, Big Bill, they were my favorite ’cause they really would knock the cover off a house. They play in the nightclubs, would play house parties through the day. Otherwise they were

rehearsing; people would be there, as many as they would be at the nightclub sometimes.⁷

She was among the first twenty performers elected to the Hall of Fame in the inaugural W. C. Handy Awards in 1980,⁸ and she won the top female vocalist award in the first *Blues Unlimited* Readers' Poll in 1973, finishing ahead of Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey.⁹ And this wouldn't be the only time Minnie was compared to such greats. Helen Oakley Dance ranked T-Bone Walker "at the top . . . with ladies like Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Memphis Minnie."¹⁰

Many people who have heard of Big Bill Broonzy or Tampa Red still don't know much about Minnie. But her songs have been recorded by performers as diverse as Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys, Mance Lipscomb, Muddy Waters, Clifton Chenier, and dozens of others, both obscure and well known. It would be no exaggeration to say that Memphis Minnie was one of the most influential blues singers ever to record.¹¹ Few today realize how extremely popular she was, with a string of hits and nearly 100 records to her credit.¹²

Countless performers were influenced by her. Johnny Shines, Eddie Boyd, Calvin Frazier, J. B. Hutto, Lowell Fulson and J. B. Lenoir all testified that they derived some aspects of their style from Memphis Minnie.¹³ Of course, a list of blues artists who played with Minnie in Chicago, not to mention those who frequently heard her and were influenced by her, would read like a Chicago Blues Who's Who, with Big Bill, St. Louis Jimmy, Washboard Sam, Memphis Slim, Tampa Red, Black Bob, Jimmie Gordon, Blind John Davis, Charlie McCoy and Sunnyland Slim near the top of the list and dozens more below.

The breadth of Minnie's influence is striking. When Chuck Berry arrived in Chicago, Minnie was recording for Leonard Chess's Checker label. Berry would soon become a Chess star, and Minnie was an important influence on his musical development. There are even rumors of a mysterious tape of an extended jam session involving Chuck Berry and Memphis Minnie, but Berry has kept silent about its details, refusing even to reveal when it was made or what songs it contains.¹⁴

Because Minnie began her recording career in 1929 and

kept going for three decades, her presence was written large across the whole history of the recorded blues. Year after year, her style evolved, and by the time illness forced her to retire, she had recorded the country blues, the urban blues, the Melrose sound, the Chicago blues and the postwar blues. Nonetheless, surprisingly little documentation exists for so extensive a career. Fortunately we have the testimony of Minnie's youngest sister, Daisy Douglas Johnson. Mrs. Johnson has remarked, however, that while her information has come directly from Minnie herself, most of it was transmitted *after* Minnie had her first stroke.¹⁵

Many of the details of Minnie's life story that came from early reports by pioneer blues researchers Georges Adins and Mike Leadbitter remain unsubstantiated, but we do not reject them out of hand.¹⁶ Indeed, in the absence of standard printed sources that usually provide the foundation of historical and biographical studies—in the absence, for example, of birth certificates for Minnie, Joe McCoy and Ernest Lawlars (Son Joe)—and in the presence of four different dates of birth established for Minnie in various works of blues criticism,¹⁷ and even by various official documents, our tale will be, by necessity, unorthodox and anecdotal. Nonetheless, we do provide documents rarely seen in blues biographies, e.g., union records and recording contracts.

We hope the organization of this book will present Minnie and her work in an enjoyable and readable form. Chapter 2 contains a historical overview of the development of blues during Minnie's lifetime, and how Minnie seemed to stretch the boundaries of its forms. Such a perspective is of crucial importance in understanding the unique aspects of Minnie's role and function. Chapters 3 through 7 provide a chronology of Memphis Minnie, from her birth to her death, in the words of her friends and relatives. Wherever possible, this information is supplemented by material from printed sources. Chapters 8 through 20 attempt to view Minnie's songs as specific products of a specific cultural moment, acted upon by conflicting forces of gender, race and class. In twelve sections, each devoted to a group of songs that bear upon a specific idea or theme, we analyze the cultural forces through which the blues, and Minnie's blues, in particular, come into being. These twelve chapters are introduced by a brief discussion

of the principles of interpretation that we use throughout the analysis. Finally, we provide a thorough discography of Memphis Minnie's work, complete with Library of Congress copyright information and, where possible, composer credits taken from the labels of the records themselves.

While our main purpose is to celebrate and delineate Memphis Minnie's life and songs, we will also examine Minnie's songs as exceptional examples of the blues genre, stunning pieces that reveal not only Minnie's magnificence, but the grandeur of the blues as well. The hundreds of sides Minnie recorded are the perfect material to teach us about the blues. For the blues are at once general and particular, speaking for millions but in a highly singular, individual voice. That is part of their magic, their art. Listening to Minnie's songs, we will hear her fantasies, her dreams, her desires, but we will hear them as if they were our own.

City Lights

T W O

WOMAN WITH GUITAR: THE RISE OF MEMPHIS MINNIE

Knock hard. Life is deaf.

—Mimi Parent

Mamie Smith's 1920 recording of *Crazy Blues* was one of the first records to demonstrate that there was a sizable African American audience who would buy vocal blues recordings performed by an African American singer.¹ In the ensuing years blues performance styles on record underwent numerous modifications as they reflected the subtle changes in tastes, economic pressures, and trends in the entertainment industry. The first blues to be recorded were the vaudeville-style "Classic" blues, usually sung by women like Bessie Smith or Ida Cox, from a stage, and accompanied by a male pianist or band. The songs themselves were often composed by black male songwriters, although a few of these women singers, e.g., Ma Rainey, wrote a number of their own songs. Their heyday on record began in 1920 and ended with the Depression. The label "Classic" has been assailed for its unsuitability, but its detractors have not been convincing.² For some, there may be a reluctance to grant "Classic" status to a period of blues dominated by women, especially when they can point to a subsequent period that seemed to be dominated by men, but the priority on record of Classic blues, and the women who sang them, speaks for itself.³ The term "Classic" blues, to describe vaudeville-style blues performance, has nonetheless disappeared from scholarly commentary.

These vaudeville-style blues dominated the blues recording industry for five or six years, beginning in 1920, but by the mid-1920s, “country blues” began to appear more and more frequently in the record company catalogs. Country blues continued to be widely recorded until the Depression brought the recording industry to a near standstill in 1932–1933. By 1934, when the recording industry began to stir again, a new combo style of blues was in the air. Throughout the thirties and into the forties and fifties, blues singers on record tended to be accompanied by a piano and drums, a bass, one or two guitars, and occasional horns or harmonicas. Amplifiers for guitars became a common sight by the 1940s. While this combo style dominated the blues scene of the 1930s and 1940s, neither “jump blues,” “urban blues,” “city blues,” “Chicago blues,” or half a dozen other nominees, has ever become the standard term to describe the music played by these small blues groups of the thirties and forties. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, this urban style had crystalized in the hands of Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf and many others to produce the well-known electric sound of what came to be called the the postwar blues, or Chicago blues.

These demarcations are neither as linear nor as finely drawn as our sketch suggests, however, and last night’s Classic blues queen could easily be the morning’s country blues artist. Singers like Lottie Kimbrough (née Beaman), for example, performed in both styles, with either Classic or downhome accompaniment, and many 1930s as well as postwar performances also refuse to fit the molds we’ve created for them. Sara Martin was most frequently recorded in the early 1920s with a piano or small group accompaniment. Sylvester Weaver, a country blues guitarist, accompanied Sara Martin for several sessions and was hailed for pioneering this unusual combination of vaudeville-styled woman singer and country blues guitarist. Were these records country blues or classic vaudeville-style blues?

Looking at the accompaniment for Gertrude Perkins, recorded in Dallas in 1927, presents us with the same potential for contradiction. Perkins was accompanied by guitarist Coley Jones and Octave Gaspard on tuba. Was this city or country blues? Straining like this against these categories suggests the categories themselves

obscure as much as they clarify. But it is important to understand these structures in order to understand how Minnie cracked them.

While the vaudeville-style blues singers were relatively sophisticated women singers who performed on the stage, the country blues artists tended to be unsophisticated males who accompanied themselves on acoustic guitars.⁴ These downhome musicians played for family and friends, at home or at parties, in juke joints or at picnics and suppers. Country blues performers tended to be semi-professionals who also farmed or performed other seasonal labor in the logging industry, levee camps, turpentine camps and similar places, but the most famous performers were often able to get by on their musical skills alone.

In many ways the ascendancy of country blues seemed progressive, and a new and younger audience was quick to respond to these highly rhythmic songs. The self-accompanied country blues performer embodied a new autonomy, and for many rural record buyers, country blues on record, as well as in person, was a fascinating step into the future. This was an exciting dance music, and the couple and individual dances that listeners did to blues accompaniment represented greater individualism for blacks than the square dances that were done to pre-blues forms.⁵

That most of the guitar-playing country blues artists on record were male is of critical importance, however, for such “progress” often contains a secret: the oppression and exploitation of women. If we are inspired by Fourier’s notion that the general index of emancipation is the level of the emancipation of women, we are confronted with the fact that just such moments as the “ascendancy” of country blues need reevaluation. Have we not already seen that there is major resistance to calling the period of female-dominated blues recording Classic, even though “Classic” satisfies the requirements of many definitions of the term and is used to describe the period that was, in fact, the vocal blues’ first heyday on record? In contrast, the vintage years of recorded (male) country blues, 1927–1933, are usually considered the “prime” years of blues recording. For example, in 1965 one critic gloated that country blues 78s were finally being recognized as valuable, while the previously highly esteemed Classic blues of the vaudeville-influenced blueswomen were now being devalued.⁶

From one perspective, then, what had happened to the vaudeville blueswomen was not at all unusual. To hire black men to fill jobs once held by black women was consistent with sexist practices of the day and upheld the mainstream cultural notions that a woman's place was in the home, that men were better than women at most jobs, and that it was a man's role to work for a living for the rest of "his" family. Further, it was a pact between males—songwriter/bandleader Perry Bradford and Okeh's Fred Hager—that allowed Mamie Smith to make her first record. While this view should not be allowed to obscure the fact that Bradford and Smith were a black team that achieved an important victory for black culture, the very fact that Smith's recording sessions had to be negotiated by Bradford supports the thesis of the pact between two males with a woman as its object.

Add to this the fact that the Classic blueswomen were being paid far more than the country bluesmen, and the former's disappearance from record is more easily understood. For example, at the beginning of her career with Columbia, Bessie Smith was paid \$125 per usable side, the same amount she was paid during her last year with Columbia; but at her peak, she was receiving \$200 per usable side. Meanwhile, Columbia's male country blues "stars" like Peg Leg Howell or Barbecue Bob received only \$15 per side. Minnie and Joe were probably paid at this latter rate for their first Columbia sides, and it's doubly ironic that Minnie, who was so often said to "play like a man" was also *paid like a man* in this atypical case where women were paid more than men.⁷

But it would be a mistake to think that the men replaced the women, or that country blues replaced the Classic blues. The Depression not only ended many vaudeville blues careers—just as it ended vaudeville—but it put the same final stamp on the livelihood of countless male country blues artists as well. When the economic situation began to improve, and blues singers began to return to the studios, neither Classic blues singers nor country blues artists would last very long. The artists who survived would be those of both sexes who had sufficiently urbanized their styles, or who could demonstrate the greatest affinity for the new swing-influenced rhythms.⁸

Minnie was a pioneer at precisely the time and place that all

of these forces coalesced. Before attempting to understand how she survived the Depression, we must first understand how she faced it, as a self-accompanied guitarist playing country blues. Almost by default, “women’s blues” has come to denote Classic, vaudeville-style blues. Minnie’s fame thus fell into the gap created by the prominence of the vaudeville blues singers on one side and the progressive aspects of the male country blues stylists on the other. A number of women refused the Classic designation by virtue of their having seized some of the privileges customarily reserved for men. To “play as good as any man” also meant to be doing what men were supposed to be doing and what women were not supposed to be doing, for such a music style was largely confined to men, or so it has been thought. But guitar-playing women like Minnie (yes, there were others) constituted an effective link that served to give female blues singing a continuity in its leanest years. Even their number is impressive.

Many of these singers are known to us through their phonograph records: The rough-voiced Mattie Delaney; Ethel McCoy; Rosa Lee Hill, Precious Bryant, all of these women accompanied themselves on guitar, as did the obscure Elvie Thomas and Geeshie Wiley, and as did Jessie Mae Hemphill, who died in 2006. Other female instrumentalists never recorded, and it was all too easy to read a hint or two about their existence without its ever registering in one’s consciousness. For example, one writer noted that Teddy Darby had “fooled around with his mother’s [guitar] . . . but had made slight progress on it at that time.”⁹ Nothing more is known about the guitar talents of Darby’s mother, and this isn’t the only enticing reference of this kind. McKinley James, Robert Shaw, Louis Myers, J. B. Lenoir, and Tommie Lee Russell all had guitar-playing mothers.¹⁰ In sum, while dozens of female performers gained a reputation as blues singers on the vaudeville stage in the early twenties, the later twenties saw the rise in popularity of the self-accompanied, downhome male blues singer. Hidden by this schematic, however, were a number of women who performed in a rural style and accompanied themselves on guitar. How well hidden they were can be seen from this comment by bluesman James Watt, when asked about Minnie’s same-sex competitors. “There was only Memphis Minnie. There wasn’t too many girl blues singers out.”¹¹

Thus, there was a significant current of women country blues performers, hidden from us through the traditional manipulation of “opposing” categories like male/female, urban/rural, downhome/city.¹² What was also hidden was the degree to which this performance style embodied, for the blueswoman, a real gain in autonomy and independence, usually reserved for male artists. Even the most pragmatic assessment reveals considerable personal benefit.

For example, much glamour was attached to the role of blues singer, regardless of how and where it was fulfilled. The wages of even the lower-paying music jobs were considerably in excess of the pitiful amounts paid to women in agriculture and domestic service or the lowest-level factory work open to poor and under-educated black women. In factory work, black women were often paid less than black men. And blues singing was far easier than back-breaking work like picking cotton.¹³ We will see that it was this latter task that Minnie would do anything to avoid. What made her so unusual was that she *could* do something.

Performance at picnics, suppers and juke joints also enabled her to establish an intimacy with her audience that the vaudeville stage made difficult. Further, Minnie wrote much of her own material. This not only enabled her to avoid the pressure and management of the often exploitative male songwriters, but it reinforced her own imaginative commitment to her songs. She was also her own manager, a gratifying role for such an obviously independent woman. Finally, Minnie played the lead guitar of her partnerships and performed more lead and solo vocals than did her partners. She also released more single records than her partner(s) or husbands. All of these factors combined to make it possible for Minnie to assume a musical identity that before her time had been achieved mostly by males. And there is considerable evidence that Minnie was acutely aware of the unusual aspects of the life she chose to live.