

Mitigating the Marginalization of Women Blues Guitarists:
An Analysis of Memphis Minnie's
Proto-Feminism

by

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ABSTRACT

The field of blues feminism was pioneered by Sandra R. Lieb, Daphne Duval Harrison, and Angela Y. Davis in the 1980s and 1990s. Their research suggests that the canonical 1920s “Classic” black blues women singers (Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Ida Cox, among others) professed feminist themes in their music. Using biographical information and lyrics as their evidence, these scholars concluded that blues women singers maintained a sisterhood with their listeners, redefined sexuality, opposed marriage, and used travel themes as a means of advocating autonomy. However, while their research is monumental and serves as an inspiration for my own work, I take issue with the fact that women blues guitarists have not been included in this discourse. As highly important figures in blues women’s history, women blues guitarists not only expressed proto-feminist sentiments in song, but leveled the “playing” field between men and women. At a time when most blues women were singers or pianists, these guitarists broke into the male guitar domain and they proved that they could be men’s equal in everything from playing guitar to participating in the same musical duels.

However, the marginalization of women blues guitarists goes far beyond blues feminism. Often overlooked, over-sexualized, and downplayed for their abilities in blues scholarship, these women rarely get their proper due. I speculate that a variety of factors are to blame: reception by consumer audiences; representation in blues scholarship; the fact that these women did not fit into the stereotypes of a woman blues singer; the problematic use of the term “Classic” blues. In order to truly give these guitarists their due, I think blues scholarship needs to remedy its flaws--most specifically, its use of stereotypes and sexism. I hope this thesis exemplifies what direction blues scholarship should be taking, for women guitarists need to be included and accurately represented in blues’ cultural narrative.

The life and lyrics of a pioneering depression era country blues artist--singer, guitarist, and songwriter, Lizzie “Memphis Minnie” Douglas—are the main points of analysis for this thesis. Even though Minnie was highly successful and popular during her time, she was rarely acknowledged in the years following her stroke in 1960 and death in the 1973. In this thesis, I uncover the ways Minnie asserted herself in song, used marriage as a means of empowerment rather than confinement, and used her unique blend of proto-feminist song themes to illuminate her status as an autonomous, guitar-slinging woman. Using Minnie as my example, I argue that women blues guitarists warrant an esteemed position in blues feminism, blues scholarship, and blues history.

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INTRODUCTION

Memphis Minnie, a black working-class woman, called no man her master, defied gender stereotypes, and exemplified a radically adventurous lifestyle that makes most careers of the '20s and '30s seem dull by comparison. At a time when women were "kept in their place," both personally and professionally, Memphis Minnie helped to make it okay for her sisters to be tough, outspoken, and play a mean guitar.

--Michael Hawkeye Herman

In the early part of the twentieth century, aside from a few coon shouters, society orchestras, and religious singers, black singers were virtually unrecorded (Cohn 88). White vaudevillians were the popular recording artists of the period, specifically Marie Cahill, Sophie Tucker, and Al Jolson. Their theatrical performances, which emerged from the minstrelsy tradition, dominated the recording industry of the 1910s; however, a black popular music and performance identity was indeed taking shape, even though record companies were slow to document it. In less than ten years' time from the recording of the first commercial blues in 1912, the first black blues singer would make her debut on record. Her "Crazy Blues" would pave the way for the "Classic" blues women singers to dominate the 1920s recorded blues scene for nearly a decade.

The advent of new century black theaters, where blacks performed for black audiences, gave way to the black vaudeville entertainment of the early twentieth century (Muir 10). Much like white vaudeville, it consisted of a variety show with a "series of unrelated and diverse acts by a wide range of talents" (Muir 10). Since most black vaudevillian performers took jobs in tent variety shows and traveling troupes around the country, the blues, which was part of black subculture, disseminated with them. Along with the popularity of blues in musicals, medicine shows, and in the last remaining strands of minstrelsy, blues was becoming a popular feature of white and black culture alike (Muir 11-27). White and black culture had an influence on each

other, giving way to “the musical embodiment of a new, vibrant, modernistic spirit sweeping America” (Muir 27).

The commercialization of the blues from oral tradition to sheet music started around 1912 when composers WC Handy, Chris Smith, and Tim Brymn turned the blues genre into a mainstream musical form fit for the stage. Blues became a “genre” that was arranged via sheet music for piano. The term “blues” was used as early as 1910 by ventriloquist Johnny W.F. “Johnnie” Woods (Muir 10), but after the aforementioned composers came onto the scene and the blues started to disseminate with traveling troupes, blues was becoming popular in the music world as well.

Even though the blues was a new “genre,” “a new, vibrant, modernistic” blues spirit emerged in 1920 that changed the landscape of the blues for nearly a decade and beyond. Black vocalist, Mamie Smith, emerged on the recording scene that year as the first black female blues singer. Her song, “Crazy Blues,” was an influential hit, selling over 75,000 copies in a month, which was an extraordinarily high number at the time (Stewart-Baxter 12). The song’s success allowed Smith to break the record industry’s levy for future black blues women singers. She paved the way for an established canon of leading, popular “Classic” blues women like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, and Victoria Spivey (Cohn 89).

The blues women singers, often referred to as “Classic” blues women, popular blues artists, or vaudeville blues artists, created a sound that would define an era; a kind of citified commerciality and urbane sophistication mixed with a sprinkle of country roots, as evidenced by their “increased improvisation on melodic lines, unusual phrasing which altered the emphasis and impact of the lyrics, and vocal dramatics using shouts, groans, moans, and wails” (Harrison

8). Their songs were written mostly via Tin Pan Alley¹, even though a few women such as Ma Rainey composed their own material. Their records were to be sold in black communities through the United States via the race records market² (Harrison 8).

The vaudevillian tradition of theatricality and comedy was a major influence on most of the blues women singers. They left home and grew up performing in traveling shows even before their teenage years. Their performances, both musically and visually, were products of this background, for the blues women singers, often called “queens,” would dress with fancy clothes, jewels, and sequins when on stage. They put an emphasis on “musicianship, showmanship, varied repertoire, and a sense of artistry” (Harrison 9). From this performance style, Harrison argues that “an emerging feminist perspective” regarding “sexual and social concerns of the woman” arose during this time (Harrison 11-13). Their songs were about liberating themes such as promiscuity, lesbianism, travel, and “broken or failed love” (Harrison 287). As a result, blues women singers were proving to be “sexually independent, self-sufficient, creative, and trendsetting” (Harrison 10).

However, even though the blues women singers were successful for nearly a decade, the depression caused a shift in the blues from show-business extravagance to the more intimate, highly personalized solo or duo stylings found in the country blues. A country blues artist traveled—also known as “rambled”---with his instrument, most typically, the guitar, looking for work. The guitar was used in the blues for its sound and close association with the banjo (which was used frequently in black culture), but the guitar was also used for its mobility. Popular country blues artists that emerged during the late 1920s were most notably Blind Lemon

¹ A significant group of composers in the 1910s and 1920s who wrote songs for popular entertainment, particularly vaudeville and Broadway.

² Race records were marketed to blacks during the 1920s through the early 1940s. Genres typically included blues, jazz, and gospel music.

Jefferson, and Charlie Patton. Yet, even though blues men dominated the recorded country blues scene, a rare breed of blues woman was also about to burst onto the scene in 1929. At a time when most women blues performers were pianists or singers, a guitar slinging country blues artist, who a habit of spitting tobacco while wearing a chiffon ball gown (Del Rey), a knack for songwriting, and guitar skills that could match any man's (Garon 38), made her debut. She would be come to be known to musicians and fans alike as the inimitable Kid Douglas or Memphis Minnie.

Lizzie Douglas (Minnie's birth name) was born on approximately June 3, 1897 in either Algiers, Louisiana or a county in Mississippi. She started out playing banjo, but she received a guitar around the age of eight, as a Christmas gift. Using the guitar as a means to avoid farm labor or domestic labor around her family's home, a pre-teen Minnie would run off with regularity to Beale Street³ in Memphis, Tennessee (located about forty miles away from where she lived in Wells, Mississippi). By 1920, Minnie is said to have moved out from her family's home to pursue a life of music around Memphis (Garon 37). In fact, scholars speculate that even as early as 1917, Minnie is said to have joined the Ringling Brothers Circus outside of Memphis near Clarksdale, Mississippi. Although little is known about her time in the Circus, scholars think Minnie gained a lot of her stage presence and performance knowledge from her experiences there (Del Rey).

According to one of her musical partners, black blues guitarist, Willie Moore, Minnie was gaining quite a reputation in Memphis in the 1920s for being a woman who could make a "guitar talk" (Garon 44). According to Big Bill Broonzy⁴, Minnie could make a "guitar moan, talk and whistle the blues" (Broonzy 138). Her work on Beale Street with black guitarist Joe

³ The entertainment center of Memphis. Beale Street was filled with clubs, theatres, street musicians, and restaurants catering to black audiences and black music. Over the years, everyone from Louis Armstrong to BB King spent part of their early careers there.

⁴ Another leading guitar contemporary of Minnie's, who dominated the Chicago blues scene in the 1930s and 1940s.

McCoy, the Memphis Jug Band, the Jack Kelly Band, and the Jed Davenport Jug Band established her as the “reigning blues queen of Memphis” (Garon 42). It should be noted that Minnie was not deemed a “blues queen” in the sense that she was a matriarchal figure who paraded on stage in gaudy outfits, but she was a “blues queen” because she could perform and play at the level of any male performer. They were referred to as Kings; she, on the other hand, was a Queen.

A blues woman’s musical role as an instrumentalist usually meant that she was an accompanist. A woman typically took the lead with her voice only, as most of the “Classic” blues singers exemplified (Garon 29). Yet, in Minnie’s pairings with guitarist Moore and guitarist Willie Brown (who also performed a duet with the famed black Delta guitarist Son House), Minnie “always played lead,”⁵ while the men supported her on rhythm⁶ guitar (Garon 45). She was ultimately paving the way for a “musical identity that before her time had been achieved mostly by males” (Garon 34). Minnie, did lead vocally as well, but according to Willie Moore, who speaks of her guitar playing and his performances with her, there “wasn’t nothing he could teach her Everything Willie Brown could play, she could play, and then she could play some things he couldn’t play” (Garon 45). Minnie was proving to be a highly skilled guitarist at a time when women hardly even used the guitar in the recorded blues, let alone used it in the same way that Minnie did.

The next significant event in Minnie’s life was her recorded musical partnership with guitarist extraordinaire Kansas Joe McCoy, her first husband. She met Kansas Joe in Memphis where they performed duets together for years. Their first recording session took place in 1929 in

⁵ Single notes lines produced by a guitarist, thus causing him to lead either the melody or the improvisatory sections of a song.

⁶ Rhythm guitar was a treated as accompaniment. A rhythm guitarist would typically use chords, ie. strum three or more notes at the same time.

Columbia's New York studios (Garon 46). They recorded six sides for Columbia and released "Bumble Bee" in 1930, which was a hit for Minnie (not so much for Kansas Joe; he did not sing on the recording and when they parted ways, she still played this song for years). "Bumble Bee" was later covered by the likes of significant blues artists such as Johnny Shines and Muddy Waters. Additionally, blues artists such as Koko Taylor, Big Mama Thornton, and Chuck Berry have all acknowledged Minnie's influence on their music. Minnie would record over one hundred and fifty songs during her career, most notably "Black Rat Swing," "Bumble Bee Blues," "I'm Talking About You," "Me and My Chauffeur," and "What's The Matter With The Mill?"

In late 1935, Minnie made another transition and recorded for the prominent record label, Melrose. The Garons state that "many blues artist were not able to make the transition from rural-sounding down home blues to the more sophisticated sounds Melrose artists turned out, and it is a remarkable sign of Minnie's resiliency that she adjusted so well, becoming a major figure in the blues world of the next two decades..." (Garon 65). When one critic called her a "female Big Bill" (Russell 34), it applied to the fact that like fellow Melrose recording artist Big Bill Broonzy, she was able to adapt to change. Her music was always adapting to the times. But, she was also called "female Big Bill" for another reason: "cutting heads"⁷ contests. She would often compete against Big Bill himself in a crowded hall in front of a panel of judges consisting of blues artists such as Sleepy John Estes, Tampa Red, or Richard Jones (Broonzy 140). Big Bill and Minnie would each take turns performing two solo songs for a prize that consisted of two bottles of whiskey. In one particular instance, which was to have occurred on Big Bill's birthday, a white man walked up to Big Bill and said, "You know you can beat that woman playing and

⁷ Musical duels that would take place in clubs.

anybody in here knows that you're the best blues player around and anywhere else" (Broonzy 139). Others were saying, "Is that man going to play against that poor little weaker woman? He should be ashamed because any man should beat a woman playing a guitar" (Broonzy 139). However, that was not the case—Minnie triumphed over Big Bill nearly every time, two bottles of whiskey in hand.

Perhaps then, given this account of Minnie's life, one would expect that Minnie would be a revered figure in blues feminism, blues history, and blues scholarship. As we have seen, she was indeed unique, trend-setting, and successful as she broke into the male domain of country blues, sporting a guitar. However, Minnie is rarely mentioned when it comes to discussions of important blues women. Instead, scholars (and listeners alike) focus on the legacy of the "Classic" blues singers. For instance, three scholars, in particular, have focused on singers in this blues canon: Angela Y. Davis, Sandra R. Lieb, and Daphne Duval Harrison. In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, Davis offers a compelling claim that female blues singers of the 1920s, most specifically Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, were originators of early black feminist⁸ themes from the 1960s and 1970s. In her view, the lives and songs of the early blues singers were expanding and challenging staid notions of female sexuality, defying the institution of marriage, destroying notions of inferiority, and establishing that independent women could have bold voices within black communities. Davis' extensive analysis of these singers' lives and lyrics illuminates the way in which black women blues singers weren't just clever lyricists or talented singers; they were committed to expressing black women's concerns and issues within society. As Davis states, her book is an "inquiry into

⁸ Davis is a pioneer in the wave of 1970s feminism that focused on the particular marginalization of black women due to race, class, gender, and sexuality. This had not been, black feminists argue, fully accounted for in white feminist theory.

the ways their recorded performances divulge unacknowledged traditions of feminist consciousness in working-class black communities” (Davis xi).

Similarly, Lieb’s *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey*, illustrates the way in which Rainey was a pioneer for articulating a “clear female perspective” (Lieb xiv). Lieb states that Rainey’s songs “reveal an astonishing range of emotional reactions to misfortune, from misery to rage and from humor to cynicism. Many songs show women aggressively confronting or attempting to change the circumstances of their lives” (Lieb xvi). In the same vein, Harrison’s book, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*, lists a plethora of themes such as sadness, sex, suicide, broken or failed love, traveling, unfaithfulness, etc (Harrison 287), and states that the blues women singers “illustrate[] their modes and means for coping successfully with gender related discrimination and exploitation; and demonstrate[] an emerging model for the working woman--one who is sexually independent, self-sufficient, creative, and trend-setting.”

However, while this research is monumental and serves as an inspiration for my own project, I take issue with the fact that this feminist formula for analysis is chiefly centered on the canon of “Classic” blues singers. Other black women performers, who are not part of the “canon,” are often largely ignored and underrepresented. This poses a problem, for a bulk of the women who are marginalized in this research tend to be blues women guitarists. Due to a variety of factors ranging from the act of guitar playing itself to ignoring the prescribed template for women blues performer’s, the contributions made by blues women guitarists such as Geeshie Wiley and Memphis Minnie have been overlooked in this feminist discourse and beyond.

This thesis uncovers Minnie’s important proto-feminist contributions in order to offer some reasons as to why blues women guitarists have been marginalized in blues’ cultural narrative. Minnie “assert[ed] an empowered presence” (Carby 472) and a “do it my way”

(Harrison 219) attitude in her brand of country blues. I will not be restating Davis' claim that blues women singers (or Minnie) were foremothers for the black feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s; however, I will be highlighting Minnie's unique blend of proto-feminism. The definition for proto-feminism that I will be using, as articulated by Harrison, is: Minnie "illustrate[s] [her] mode[] and means for coping successfully with gender related discrimination and exploitation; and demonstrate[s] an emerging model for the working woman--one who is sexually independent, self-sufficient, creative, and trend-setting" (Harrison 287). However, unlike the feminism of Davis' era, Minnie was not chiefly "pro-woman." She wanted equality for all and she especially wanted to show that a woman could (and should) be allowed to engage in the same activities as a man (like playing the guitar).

The bulk of this thesis consists of my close readings of Minnie's lyrics and before I offer a description of each of my chapters, I wish to open up a discussion regarding my analytical approach to her lyrics. Doing so allows me to explain why I analyze her lyrics as a product of the personal rather than a product of a conventional persona. I am aware that it is not customary for literary analysis to assume that the author of a piece is the speaker; however, while there is no documentation from Minnie that these songs are about her real life experiences specifically, we cannot forget that blues lyrics, on the whole, are highly personalized accounts of an author's experiences, feelings, and historical events, as illustrated by this quote from David Evans:

Most blues songs are about personal experiences and personal feelings and they tend to concentrate on themes of man-woman relationships and the related emotions -- the whole range of emotions, happy and sad... [The Blues] tends not to be superficial music, but a very deep expression of a personal, and a collective, feeling... They deal with the

changes and fluctuations of life, and the possibilities of change, too, on a very personal level.

Due to a blues songwriter's attention to "personal experiences and personal feelings," I will be treating Minnie's lyrics as an expression of her feelings and experiences, not as an expression of a conventional persona. However, this isn't to say that one cannot read Minnie's lyrics as having a persona. I argue, however, that Minnie's lyrics inhabit a persona only through the definition put forth to me by Lorna Dee Cervantes⁹:

Much like a poet or a bard or a minstrel, the self and one's life experiences are the persona and subject matter of the characters in the song. Just as when I am onstage presenting my poems as "me" and "not-me" with both invented and absolutely autobiographical events and images forming the "truth" of the poem - as me, Lorna Dee Cervantes... All her songs are autobiographical referring to herself, Kid Douglas. Her songs suggest and supply direct action for change to relieve the suffering of the people. When she writes about a house-fire she means her house and her parents' house and her sister's house...; Reaching Pete was a real vicious police chief in Helena, for example.

I use this definition because other definitions of persona, which render that a persona is a mask or that lyrics are from the point of view of an imaginary character in the author's head, do not apply here. This would imply that the lyrics are, using Evans' words, "superficial." As Cervantes says, "both invented and absolutely autographical events and images form[] the truth," but ultimately, "all [of Minnie's] songs are autobiographical."

⁹ Esteemed Chicana poet who also did extensive historical research on the life and lyrics on Memphis Minnie.

It is also worth mentioning here that Minnie played a specific kind of blues: country blues. More specifically, Minnie played Delta blues, where a performer was typically a solo guitarist and also a songwriter. Minnie composed nearly all of her own songs and a majority of her songs are from a first person of view: “at a time when most female vocalists sang Tin Pan Alley material, Minnie wrote her own lyrics and accompanied her singing with magnificent guitar-playing” (Herman). This is not to say, however, that women blues singers did not have personal elements in their music, but it cannot be ignored that white and black men typically wrote songs for the “Classic” blues women singers. Their music, as Herman’s quote tells us, emerged out of the realm of vaudeville and Tin Pan Alley¹⁰. Minnie, on the other hand, penned her own material.

Given this distinction between “Classic” blues singers and Minnie’s brand of country blues, the “Classic” blues puts more of an emphasis on interpreting the lyrics in performance. For blues women singers, “the personal” does not come through the lyrics on the page (which were written by someone else), but through the actual stage (or the recording studio) performance. Minnie, however, in writing her own songs, had a chance to put herself on the page, before she put “herself” onto the stage. That is why, while some may believe these songs are from a typical definition of a persona and some think persona is a cause for controversy, I refer to Minnie as the speaker in my close readings due the concepts mentioned above.

Chapter One addresses Minnie’s perplexing exclusion from the pantheon of exemplary blues women in blues feminism and her marginalization in blues scholarship as a whole. I examine a few texts that remark on the situation of a woman’s place in blues research and blues history by leading scholars such as Hazel V. Carby, Samuel Charters, and Alan Lomax. I discuss

¹⁰ Ma Rainey was an exception to this rule, since she composed a number of her own songs; however, this was a rarity.

Carby's problem of commerciality in women's blues discourse and the fact that scholars avoid, and often exploit women who pursue male dominated activities a la Memphis Minnie. I offer some other viewpoints surrounding her lack of popularity after her death, like the fact that she was not as well-received by white audiences or that scholars such as Lomax and Charters misrepresented her in blues scholarship.

Chapter Two focuses on various themes in Minnie's selected lyrics composed in the period from 1929-1940¹¹ such as cars, chauffeurs, biting bugs, and tribute songs. Unfortunately, due to content and page limitations, I was unable to transcribe more lyrics or include more themes, such as travel, in this chapter. I hope that work will transpire at later date. Here, I explicate the themes that are most important to my argument. I claim, through close readings of her lyrics, that Minnie had proto-feminist tendencies that were similar yet different from Ma Rainey or Bessie Smith. I also show that Minnie's word choice, such as what type of car she refers to and the act of "stealing" a pistol, all contribute to the way she initiates an empowered female dynamic in her songs. Minnie was not complacent in any of these select songs; she used strategy, assertiveness, and crafty manipulation to achieve her desires, all while she implemented her unique form of proto-feminism--women should be able to be a man's equal.

Chapter Three focuses on two selected recorded duets with Minnie's husband, Kansas Joe McCoy: "Can I Do It For You?-Pt. 2" and "What Fault You Find of Me-Pt. 1." I argue that Minnie was an exception to Davis' view that marriage is a restrictive "institution." For Minnie, marriage was a strategic advantage. Marriage allowed her to gain power by defying marital conventions and by downplaying her husband's pleas. She dictates the direction of these pieces

¹¹ For the purpose of this thesis, the material I chose just happened to fall within this time period. Some scholars would consider this to be her peak years, but that is not why I chose songs from this specific period in time.

with her own refutations and aloofness. My conclusion ties all three of these aspects together; her life, her lyrics, and her exclusion, by summing up my points, and restating my claim: Memphis Minnie should be included in feminist blues discourse and that blues scholarship needs to be reformed to stop marginalizing women blues guitarists.

Overall, I hope my thesis will persuade readers and scholars alike that Memphis Minnie is a worthy candidate for discussion in feminist discourse and blues history. However, I am not just being an advocate or a cheerleader for Minnie here. Minnie's marginalization speaks on behalf of all women blues guitarists. Her marginalization exposes the fact that blues scholarship needs to be reformed, and needs to do away with the unnecessary categorization of artists that leads to stereotypes and sexist renderings. I hope this thesis is an example of how including blues women guitarists in blues' cultural narrative can be a step in the right direction for blues scholarship.

Chapter One

Why Not Memphis Minnie?

She was the second most recorded female blues musician in the country. The first was Bessie Smith, but Bessie Smith didn't play guitar or write her own songs or forge a career spanning four decades under a brand new paradigm: the female band-leader, singer-songwriter, guitarist. And unlike Memphis Minnie, Bessie Smith didn't dominate the age of acoustic blues while clearly pioneering the age of electrified blues bands. Neither has Bessie Smith proved to be the enduring cultural figure¹² Memphis Minnie has, becoming a source of inspiration to latter day blues women and experiencing a remarkable historical reassessment that is still ongoing.

--Roger Hahn¹³

The marginalization of blues women guitarists is one of the main points of contention for this thesis, leaving me to wonder why Minnie's importance suffers from diminution, while Rainey and Smith receive the predominance of listeners' and scholars' attention. I am befuddled by the fact that such a successful and pioneering figure like Minnie--"the second most recorded female blues musician in the country...[a] female bandleader, singer-songwriter, guitarist" (Hahn)--could be left in the shadows. Therefore, I would like to use this chapter to explore my "answers" to an ultimately unanswerable question: why not Memphis Minnie—why hasn't she received her¹⁴ due?

I use this chapter to expose the deeper cultural problems with gender, stereotypes, terms (canons), and representation of race in blues feminism and blues scholarship. The marginalization of women blues guitarists gets at the heart of a deeply flawed, sexist, and stifling

¹² One could say that Hahn's point is false because Minnie was marginalized—thus, she was by no means an "enduring cultural figure." However, as we will come to see, black culture and the black community allowed Minnie to be an "enduring" figure. The black community truly admired her; the white community, not so much.

¹³ This quote is included here to set the stage for how Minnie redefined what it meant to be a blues-woman, as evidenced by her songwriting, pioneering electric blues, and guitar playing. One has to wonder if Minnie's differences from blues women singers, as highlighted by Hahn, are some of the reasons she was marginalized. This chapter deals with that possibility.

¹⁴ This question also applies to women blues guitarists overall, not just Minnie.

system of blues historiography used by some blues scholars and music consumers alike. I speculate that Minnie's marginalization could be attributed to her reception by white audiences, her atypical¹⁵ role of woman blues performer, the problematic use of the term "Classic" blues, and black women guitarists' representation in some male-authored blues scholarship. Furthermore, as with my whole thesis, this chapter examines not only Minnie's plight, but why so many blues women guitarists are forgotten and underrepresented in blues scholarship. Rescuing Minnie is my attempt to remedy the deeply flawed system of blues historiography and scholarship. Ultimately, I hope this thesis can initiate others to do the same.

Minnie was "the most popular country blues singer of her time" (Lavere). Her very first recording session for Columbia on June 18, 1929 produced one her biggest hits¹⁶, "Bumble Bee Blues." It was such a hit that she recorded various versions of it throughout her career. Her audience of mainly black consumers enjoyed each new version, so much so, that she even inspired blues legends such as Muddy Waters¹⁷ and Slim Harpo¹⁸ to create their own versions (with a male point-of-view) in the 1950s (Del Rey). When she had to adopt the swingier orchestrations characteristic of the Melrose record label, Minnie had no problem assimilating. She went from being one of the first musicians to use a National resonator¹⁹ for the country blues to being one of the first musicians to use the electric guitar, all in the same decade, the 1930s (Del Rey). Langston Hughes wrote about her performance on New Year's Eve 1942 in the *Chicago Defender*. Minnie's use of the electric guitar was described as "a musical version of

¹⁵ She was a guitarist, singer, and songwriter at a time when blues women were pianists or just singers.

¹⁶ Her other hits included "Me and My Chauffeur Blues," "When The Levee Breaks" (covered by Led Zeppelin), "Black Rat Swing" and "What's The Matter With The Mill?"

¹⁷ "Honey Bee," 1951.

¹⁸ "I'm a King Bee," 1957.

¹⁹ An acoustic guitar that used one or more metal cones to produce and amplify its sound.

electric welders plus a rolling mill” (Hughes). Even though Minnie had just started using the electric guitar only a couple years earlier, she was already taking full control of her electric side as well as her acoustic side (Del Rey).

Minnie was frequently praised highly by her contemporaries and the younger, upcoming musicians who would emerge out of the black community. Blues singer Koko Taylor, who was nearly thirty years Minnie’s junior, credited Minnie’s “Me and My Chauffeur Blues” as one of the first records that she ever listened to (Garon 25). Baby Boy Warren²⁰ said that “the other musician I admired was a woman—Memphis Minnie” (Garon 25). Similarly, Bukka White, BB King’s cousin and famed resonator²¹ player, said “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” (Garon 25-26). In the black blues circuit, Minnie gained quite a reputation in Memphis and Chicago for being a woman who was making a “guitar talk” (Garon 44). According to Big Bill Broonzy, as stated in my introduction, she could make a “guitar moan, talk and whistle the blues” (Broonzy 138).

It is also worth noting that she was revered in the black community for her audacious personality as well. The Garons state that “nearly every blues artist who testified to Minnie’s rough behavior also loved and respected her” (Garon 99). Many quotes attest to Minnie’s forthcoming actions, tobacco chewing habits, and whiskey drinking; however, many anecdotes of Minnie read like Brother John Sellers’: “But she was so stern sometimes and Memphis Minnie would always say, ‘I drink anywhere I please.’ ... You know, they don’t talk about Memphis Minnie like they do Bessie Smith, but she was a great artist and she knew the guitar and played it well and she used to be the tops” (Garon 100).

²⁰ Detroit blues singer and guitarist. Prominent in the 1950s.

Minnie played for mainly black audiences, but she was often called to play for “white parties, either when W.C. Handy couldn’t make it down from Memphis, or when the party was too small to warrant his august presence” (Garon 44). It could be said that when Minnie played for white audiences, she played “second fiddle” to the more popular black artists of the time. Indeed, even though Minnie was highly successful and played for both audiences, one could make the case that she was certainly better understood and better appreciated by black audiences. By “better understood” and “better appreciated,” I mean that her music largely appealed to black audiences.

Her music appealed to mainly black audiences because she wrote her own songs with her particular (and collective) black experience in mind. She also changed with the times, as she was always on top of the stylistic changes occurring in black blues music. To offer an example, here is an excerpt from her song, “Reachin’ Pete” in which Minnie sings about the treatment she received from a real-life police officer in Helena, Arkansas nicknamed “Reachin’ Pete”

(Cervantes):

Friend, you go to Helena, stop on Cherry Street
 Friend, you go to Helena, stop on Cherry Street
 And just ask anybody to show you Reachin' Pete

He's the tallest man, walks on Cherry Street
 He's the tallest man, walks on Cherry Street
 And the baddest copper ever walked that beat

(spoken: Eh, let's go to town now, that's what I'm talking about)

He met me one Sunday morning, just about the break of day
 He met me one Sunday morning, just about the break of day
 I was drinking my moonshine, he made me throw my knife away.

Minnie talks about getting stopped by a police officer who is well known in Arkansas (Cervantes). Minnie's black audiences from the south would have certainly known about him or a figure like him. Even Minnie's vernacular throughout the piece signifies that her audience would have known who he was: "friend" and "just ask anybody." Minnie was writing about people and events that her black audience could relate to. She was not a vaudevillian influenced performer who operated under white management and had white songwriters write her songs, like Bessie Smith.

Minnie's music was hard driving, sexual, and raw; therefore, lyrically and musically, Minnie's music was largely bereft of that vaudevillian influence that came from white culture and seeped its way into the style of the "Classic" blues women. Minnie was able to produce her material the way she saw fit. Now, this is not to say that record companies did not restrict or have an influence over her musical output. However, adding white managers to a record companies' influence leaves practically no room for expression on the artist's part. This may be one of the reasons Minnie really never got her due outside of the black community, as illustrated in this quote by Paul Oliver (Oliver 103):

Fats Domino is a singer whose blues, smoothed at the edges and charmingly delivered, attracts a white audience: it is comfortably exciting. But the blues of Memphis Minnie, J.B. Lenore, Leroy Dallas, Lil Son Jackson or Big Walter Price is too tough, too earnest to break far into the popular market.

"Bessie Smith" could easily replace "Fats Domino" here. Bessie's blues was "charmingly delivered" because of its vaudevillian presentation. Even though blues women singers like Bessie Smith shouted and moaned when they delivered their blues, their blues was still more urbane and polished. The blues moved from being a music of oral tradition to W.C Handy's

sheet-music urban blues in the early 20th century. The “Classic” blues was a derivative of the latter, a typically formulaic blues with a strict blues chord progression and professionally composed lyrics. Minnie’s music, on the other hand, consisted of songs she penned based on her own experiences and a black collective audience in mind. She often made up arrangements on the spot and took improvisatory guitar solos as well.

Minnie’s music was rough at the edges. She used double entendre and sexual themes liberally. She knew that it was forbidden for women to whistle in public, but she included whistling at the beginning of her tune, “Frankie and Jean” anyway (Cervantes). She often confronted “tough” issues in her songs like an overbearing police officer in Helena, Arkansas named “Reachin’ Pete” and she wrote about how a doctor she had was a “dirty mother fuyer.”²² Indeed, Minnie’s songs were too “earnest” (that is, too raw) to be appreciated by a white “popular market.” She was not under the same white thumb of commercialism that Bessie Smith was and as a result, Minnie’s worth was never realized much beyond the black community. The sad reality is that if a black artist is better respected by a black audience and not a white one, he or she will remain underground (or only full realized in the black community). As is often the case with these type of artists, the artist will also be misrepresented by white scholars who have false ideas of what/who that artist is *supposed* to be, whereas the artist who appeals to both whites and blacks, like Bessie Smith, is often revered for decades.

For examples of how an artist like Minnie was represented by some white blues scholars, I turn to two leading men: Alan Lomax and Samuel Charters. The son of John Lomax, Alan worked for over six decades as one of the most important folklorists and musicologists of the early and mid-twentieth century. Alan and his father compiled thousands of field recordings of

²² A double entendre for “dirty mother-fucker.”

folk musicians throughout the American South, Southwest, Midwest, and Northeast, as well as Haiti and the Bahamas for the Smithsonian Institute. From their findings, they were able to publish definitive anthologies such as *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, and *Our Singing Country* (with Ruth Crawford Seeger). Lomax passed away in the early 2000s. Samuel Charters was a leading blues scholar recognized for the work he did in the mid twentieth century and beyond. A self-made scholar, his 1950s era book, *The Country Blues*, was one of the first publications of blues history with research based on the bluesmen themselves.

Lomax started becoming one of the leading scholars on folk music²³ in the 1930s, which was the same time that Minnie achieved her prominence. His opinion regarding Minnie, blues women, and women playing guitar is worth including and critiquing here, for it shows the mindset of scholars of Minnie's era. In the *The Land Where the Blues Began*²⁴: "With few exceptions," Lomax says, "only women in show business, women of questionable reputation, women who flaunted their loose living, publicly performed the blues –women like Mamie Smith, Bessie Smith, and Memphis Minnie." (Lomax 362). Lomax's decision to use "questionable reputation" and "loose living" is indicative of the sexualized mindset that we will see later. More than that, both of his points are formulated from falsities.

First, Lomax ignores the talent that these women had and immediately targets their sexuality. His use of "questionable reputation" falls short of calling them prostitutes. Indeed, these women professed sexual liberation in their songs, but that does not mean that they were "loose" by any means. "Loose" implies that they were overly promiscuous. What these women

²³ Folk music, in this context, means blues, roots, country, etc. It's an umbrella term.

²⁴ This book was published in 1993. Even though it was not published at the time Minnie was performing, I use it here because Lomax is talking about blues women singers of Minnie's era. He was alive at the time they were being recorded, so thus, he is technically a primary source.

were doing with their sexuality was much more complicated than that. They did not particularly want a “cheap feel;” they wanted to fulfil their desire for sexual autonomy.

Second, it was certainly not a requirement for women in “show business” to have these qualities like Lomax claims. Reducing these women to their sexuality only shows how blind Lomax was to their talent as blues performers. Lomax automatically assumes that gender established a set of universal qualities (promiscuity) for women blues performers, regardless of who they actually were. These misrepresentations of women’s abilities by a leading scholar of the blues are disheartening. One cannot help but think of all the readers who were misinformed by these sexist notions. This could explain why it took until the early 1990s for Minnie to have her own biography, for the leading blues scholarship did not acknowledge a blues women’s true worth and thus, blues women were not regarded as important figures.

We will see that the guitar gives Lomax yet another reason to go forth with his over-sexualized statements. Therefore, blues women performers are not only marginalized on the whole, but the addition of the guitar makes them doubly so. He goes on to say (Lomax 361):

Not many women would risk playing a guitar before an audience. Even Rosalie Hill, daughter of maestro Blind Sid Hemphill, taught by him to play guitar as her mothers and sisters could, confessed to feeling “funny” about getting up in-front of folks and picking the blues....I believe, along with the great Curt Sachs, that instruments like the guitars and violins are shaped like the feminine body and have phallic necks. Holding and manipulating such a sex symbol in public seems to be an act appropriate only for men...The way in which blues musicians have come to handle guitars makes this symbolism more overt. The guitar is butted against the hips, with the neck pointing straight ahead, and handled in a masturbatory way. Meanwhile, the strings are choked

down close to the sound holes, and plucked, stroked, frailed, as if female erotic parts were being played with, while the instrument itself emits orgiastic sounds.

It appears that Lomax cannot stop himself from making sexual references. He goes on a tangent stating that the guitar is a “sex symbol” and it has a “feminine body” and a “phallic neck” and whomever plays it is handling it “in a masturbatory way.” The fact that Lomax equates guitar playing with groping of the female body takes away from the instrument’s importance to the blues and the true boldness with which women who played it inhabited. The guitar was not just an opportunity to “emit[] orgiastic sounds.” It provided a medium where one could assume a responsive and lead role in the blues, and where one could also move from town to town due the guitar’s mobility. For a woman, this meant that she was trekking into the forbidden land of a male domain, as the guitar was chiefly used by males in the country blues. Lomax completely ignores the fact that Rosalie Hill might have felt “funny” playing the guitar in front of audiences because many women simply did not do that during this period.

Notice also, as I previously mentioned, Lomax was one of the key folklorists who compiled field recordings and documented music history. One has to wonder then—if he misrepresented blues women performers and guitarists in such a sexist and careless way, how well did he actually document music history? A statement that speaks to this from Lorna Dee Cervantes goes as follows: “when Lomax first was recording he was interested in work songs and didn't think women worked... “[Minnie] disliked him for presenting Ledbetter²⁵ as an ape on stage after she read the spread in “Life Magazine” with the title, “Can Music Soothe the Savage Beast?” A couple of things can be gathered from Minnie’s opinion of Lomax. One, he again

²⁵ A reference to the popular country blues contemporary of Minnie’s, Leadbelly. His real name was Huddie William Ledbetter.

paints his black subjects in unfavorable and inaccurate ways—as an “ape” and “savage beast”—and two, from a blues artist’s point of view (Minnie’s), Lomax was not documenting blues history in a particularly accurate way.

Surprisingly, Lomax’s scholarship is not the only place where we can find these misrepresentations. Let us look at the following quote from Samuel Charters, who came out around twenty years after Lomax. He says of Minnie in his book, *Blues Makers*: “the image she projected of herself, however, was poor, often alone, often resentful—sometimes even pathetic in her need for affection” (Charters 91). This statement is so drastically inaccurate that one has to wonder if Charters even listened to one of Minnie’s songs before he wrote his book. Minnie used affection as a tool to get what she wanted out of the relationships in her songs. She was never a man’s “girl” unless he was her “little boy” first. Affection was never a “need” and Minnie was never “pathetic;” she was proactive. Any woman who composes a song with the line “I don’t care what in the world you do, you can’t do nothing to me²⁶” and incorporates it into a duet with her husband, is not indebted to affection. Any woman whose song “Frisco Town” talks about hopping a train so she can leave her poor relationship and get an abortion (Cervantes), cannot be “pathetic.”

I would like to bring in another point raised by Hahn which speaks to this infatuation with the “pathetic.” Hahn said that “most of the people who get the most attention from the world of blues and jazz tend to be people who have led tragic lives, tragic heroes...The more pathetic a person becomes, the more they fit our image: oh, they’re singing the real blues.” This is a valid point because in Minnie’s case, she was never “pathetic,” despite the aforementioned quote where Charters thought that she was (Charters 91). In this way, one would think Charters

²⁶ From “Can I Do It For You-Part 2.”

would have been focusing on her more, for she fit the stereotypical role of the “pathetic” blues performer. However, Charters uses “pathetic” as a put-down. In Hahn’s words, “[Minnie] was a very self-made woman. She was very powerful. She took control of her career.” A woman who is “pathetic” would not do those things. Thus, to people who were not used to seeing a woman like this or did not want to see a woman like this (I speculate that Charters could have been of either opinion), she was a bit of a threat and therefore, Charters may have been prompted to treat her ability with condescension.

Contrary to the problematic assumptions made by Charters, just because Minnie is a woman blues performer does not mean that she swoons for love and when she does not get it, she “lays down and cries” (Davis 74). It is fair to say that Charters thinks that her gender prescribes a template for the content of her songs, regardless if she follows that template or not. Rather than examining women blues artists for their actual work, Lomax and Charters are content with examining stereotypes and producing inaccurate accounts of who these blues women actually were as performers. This poses a problem: if two major authorities on the blues are producing sexist scholarship such as this, no wonder Minnie has not gotten the attention she deserves and two, even if a reader were to have read only Lomax and Charters’ accounts of Minnie (of which I am sure many blues feminists have), she would think that Minnie was “loose” and stereotypically swooning for affection in her songs. Given that, no wonder she has not been included in more studies on blues feminism and beyond. These inaccurate and lackluster representations of Minnie expose some of the main reasons why she has been left in the shadows. These accounts do not speak of who she was in reality. In reality, she was a powerful, self-made woman. This raises another question: why were these scholars so blind to those characteristics?

One may speculate that antiquated ways of thinking contributed to this problem, for Lomax and Charters emerged out of 1930s and 1950s thought. However, even looking into the 1990s with works by Davis where we would expect more progressive ways of thinking, we still see the same trends. Blues women singers, who embody the stereotypical template of a woman blues performer--a "Classic" blues singer who only sings, does not play an instrument, and who has a vaudevillian background--is still getting all the attention. Women blues guitarists, on the other hand, are still being marginalized, still being misrepresented, and are still being forgotten. This exposes a serious flaw, because even though years have passed and thinking has progressed, the mindset of scholars really has not. This applies to Charters and Lomax too. Both books that I analyzed were from the 1990s, yet they might as well have been published in the 1930s and 1950s, for their mindsets were still stuck in those time periods.

It can also be speculated that the term "Classic" blues contributed to scholars' blindness. Stereotypes regarding what women blues women performers are supposed to be (dress, performance styles, voice), often emerge from compartmentalizing the uncategorizable. Blues is such a broad art-form, encompassing many different performance styles, regions, and experiences, yet time and time again, it is made to fit into narrow categories such as "Classic" blues, "rock blues," "urban blues," "Chicago blues," "country blues," etc. These categories not only stifle creativity, but allow for the canonization of some artists and not others. Ultimately, this leaves room for the marginalization of artists who do not fit neatly into these categories. Needless to say, Minnie was one of these unclassifiable artists due to her use of the guitar as a woman and her pioneering music which emerged between the end of "Classic" blues and the beginning of country blues. Therefore, I think it is worth examining why "Classic" blues is not a suitable term to use in general.

First, let me explain what the term “Classic” blues means. Women blues singers of the 1920s, starting with Mamie Smith in 1920, are generally grouped under this term. Everyone from Ma Rainey to Bessie Smith to Ida Cox is typically regarded as a “Classic” blues artist. These blues women singers, often called “queens,” would dress with fancy clothes, jewels, and sequins when on stage. They put an emphasis on “musicianship, showmanship, varied repertoire, and a sense of artistry” (Harrison 9). Generally, they performed songs that were written for them by professional Tin-Pan Alley songwriters, their artistry lay in their delivery of the song.

Due to these women singers’ popularity, “Classic” blues has also come to mean “women’s blues.” Notice, however, that nearly all of the women included in the category of “Classic” blues were chiefly singers. On occasion, a pianist may come into the fold, but other than that, these women did not play an instrument. If “Classic” blues meant “women’s blues,” then “women’s blues” only included women blues *singers*. As a result, the term birthed the stereotype that women blues performers were typically singers. Women like Minnie, who played guitar and sang, were generally considered an “other.” Blues guitar came to be known as a male prerogative, leaving Minnie not only as an “other,” but as a woman who embodied a male role. It can be speculated, then, that if the term “Classic” blues were not so narrow, Minnie might have been included in this canon.

In some ways, Minnie was too pioneering for a term like “Classic” blues anyway. Let me bring in the following quote by Hazel Carby which expresses why she was too pioneering and why the label “Classic” blues is “inadequate” (Carby 52):

The blues women of the twenties and thirties are usually collectively referred to as the “classic blues singers,” but this label is inadequate. On the one hand, it does not effectively describe the wide variety of blues and popular song they performed and, on

the other hand, the label acts to separate the musical production of men from that of women. Women, like Memphis Minnie, who sang blues that are not classified as “Classic Blues” and who utilized musical structures that have been associated by blues critics with male performers are consequently ignored in histories of the blues.

Carby has two distinct problems with the term, “Classic” blues. One, it does not describe the “wide variety of blues and popular song they performed.” In Minnie’s case, she had one foot in the country blues, which is where male blues artists typically accompanied themselves on guitar, yet she adapted easily to the Melrose sound and she was one of the first musicians to incorporate the use of the electric guitar into her music. Remember, Minnie’s career lasted thirty years, which was much longer than Ma Rainey’s or Bessie Smith’s. As a result, her music was always adapting to the times and did not follow a monolithic vaudevillian style like many of the blues women singers.

Two, Carby states that the term “Classic” blues “separate[s] the musical production of men from that of women.” In Minnie’s case, she did not “separate the musical production;” she *merged* the musical production with that of men. It was said that she could “play as good as any man” (Garon 33) and this posed a problem for terms such as “Classic” blues. In so doing, she was implementing “what men were supposed to be doing and what women were not supposed to be doing” into her performances (Garon 33). Women were *supposed* to be just singers, and when Minnie wasn’t that, she was treated as an unclassifiable oddity, or as an anomaly. One would think her uniqueness would be a cause for appreciation. However, she differed so much from the norm that scholars either resorted to downplaying her ability or ignoring her altogether.

For an example of how scholars downplayed her ability, let us turn again to Charters. Charters states a couple of times throughout *Blues Makers* that “[Minnie] **learned** to use barred chords”²⁷ in her recorded songs. “Learned” is bolded here because of how he uses it to downplay Minnie’s ability. Charters could have said, for instance, when Minnie *incorporated* barred chords into her music. Instead, he acts as if she did not know how to play barred chords before a certain point. Maybe Minnie did not know how to play barred chords before this point, it is hard to know for sure; however, how would Charters know when she learned how to play barred chords? He is making an assumption. Certainly using barred chords in recorded songs, even if one has not used them before, does not equate to just learning them. And given Minnie’s background as a street performer who frequently participated in guitar duets (where barred chords would accompany the lead lines or the singing of the other guitarist), I speculate that it is highly unlikely that Minnie just suddenly acquired an ability to play barred chords when she began recording. Willie Moore, a contemporary of Minnie’s who participated in guitar duets and guitar trios with her, told the Garons that “everything Willie Brown could play, she could play, and then she could play some things he couldn’t play” (Garon 45). Given this account, one can infer that Minnie knew a lot more things than just barred chords, even in her early years. However, Charters acts as if she was not the successful and skillful player that she really was.

Minnie treated the music industry as if it were unsexed. Scholars, unfortunately, did not. As we have seen, the marginalization of Minnie and fellow women blues guitarist can be attributed to her reception by white audiences, her atypical role of woman blues performer, the problematic use of the term “Classic” blues, and representation in some male-authored blues

²⁷ Movable chords on the guitar that can be played in multiple places on the guitar neck. A guitarist is usually considered to be a more “advanced player” if he or she can play outside of open position. Barred chords allow a guitarist to make chords more mobile and as such, he is not restricted to playing the chords in only one place on the guitar neck.

scholarship. In order to ensure women like Minnie don't get pushed by the wayside, these flaws need to be remedied, especially in blues scholarship, which is supposed to preserve a history, not skew it. As it stands now, any time a woman blues performer is different from the norm, she will be ignored. And, ignoring these women is like ignoring other prominent figures in history—pieces of America's cultural history, especially women's history, are not fully actualized.

Chapter Two

Proto-Feminist Themes of the Empowered Woman Guitarist

Scholarship may discover hidden patterns within the songs, or historical forces that helped shape the blues, but then it must go forward, into a realm often dismissed by scholars as “mere poetry,” but a realm nonetheless that locates the source of the interchange that constitutes the heart of the blues.

--Paul and Beth Garon

Paul Garon professes in *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* that “the blues is poetry without a doubt” (Garon 1). Minnie’s lyrics are no exception. Her word choice, imagery, and subject matter, right down to which car she picks in a particular song, are all vital to the construction of her self-assertive, empowering womanhood. Through close readings of her various songs such as “Me and My Chauffeur Blues,” “Garage Fire Blues,” “Biting Bug,” and “Ma Rainey,” I show that Minnie uses assertiveness, and crafty manipulation to achieve her desires. More than that, we can see that Minnie also uses her songs as a way to implement her own proto-feminist stance. Her songs abound with notions of equality between the sexes, with a particular emphasis on the fact that men can also serve women in the same ways that women serve men. In the same way that Minnie was not afraid to elevate herself to any man’s level, she was also not afraid to express these notions in song.

Using Davis and Lieb as my examples, this chapter is divided thematically. I will be focusing on conventional blues themes such as “sisterhood,” and “call and response,” so one can see the way that Minnie adheres to but also redefines the conventions associated with these themes. By exploring Minnie’s use of chauffeurs, cars, biting bugs, travel, tribute songs, and her word choice, it will be clear how Minnie “illustrated [her] mode[] and means for coping successfully with gender related discrimination and exploitation; and demonstrated an emerging model for the working woman--one who is sexually independent, self-sufficient, creative, and

trend-setting” (Harrison 287) with her “autonomous, indomitable, versatile, ambitious, industrious, and sensuous” style (Harrison 219).

First, let us begin with an analysis of Minnie’s “Me and My Chauffeur Blues:”

Wants to see my chauffeur,
I wants him to drive me,
I wants him to drive me downtown
Says he drives so easy,
I can’t turn him down.

But I don’t want him,
But I don’t want him,
To be riding these girls,
To be riding these girls around,
So I’m gonna steal me a pistol, shoot my chauffeur down.

Well, I must buy him,
Well, I must buy him,
A brand new V-8,
A brand new V-8 Ford
Then he won’t need no passengers,
I will be his load.

Going to let my chauffeur,
Going to let my chauffeur,
Drive me around the,
Drive me around the world.
Then he can be my little boy,
Yes, I’ll be his girl.

(Me and My Chauffeur Blues-1941)

“Me and My Chauffeur Blues” a song about Minnie’s ride with a personal driver, was one of Minnie’s biggest hits. She first recorded it as a guitar duet with her soon-to-be legal husband, Little Son Joe Lawlars, in Chicago in 1941. The song’s popularity was on par with that of her other major career hit, “Bumble Bee Blues.” She recorded it again in the late 1950s for Chess Records--a famed record company in Chicago that recorded artists such as Muddy Waters

and Howlin' Wolf. Minnie also played a twenty minute version of the song when she dueled with Big Bill Broonzy (Broonzy 139).

When the Garons analyzed this piece, they asserted that “the driver and the ride itself most obviously referred to a lover, and sexual activity” (Garon 274). However, the Garons failed to notice the deeper implications behind Minnie’s word choice. The Garons may have been thinking of the male subject as a counterpart to the “easy rider” found in Ma Rainey’s “Weeping Woman Blues” or Bessie Smith’s “Yellow Dog Blues,” in which scholar Sandra Lieb states that an “easy rider” is “an image of a good lover” because it “compares the motions of intercourse to the rocking movement of riding a mule” (Lieb 99). Or the Garons may have been thinking that Minnie actually implied “driver,” as Lightning Hopkins did in his 1949 answer to “Me and My Chauffeur” blues, “Automobile:” “Yes, you were sitting there happy with your handsome driver at the wheel, in your brand new automobile.” They even go so far as to say that the song, especially its use of “chauffeur,” is “without the metaphorical maneuverability” found in another one of her songs, “Garage Fire Blues” (Garon 273-274). By “metaphorical maneuverability,” the Garons are referring the idea that Minnie’s use of “chauffeur” is not very creative, at least in the sense that the word would have any “maneuverability” besides what “chauffeur” usually stands for. However, Minnie’s use of “chauffeur” is precisely what propels and stands out in this piece. Minnie, as an assertive woman, is taking command in this song and her crafty threats, car choice, and word choice, show that she would like to be served by her “chauffeur.”

Minnie does not use “driver” or “rider,” but she uses “chauffeur.” A “driver” or “rider” are more colloquial terms. A person who drives a taxi is a “driver” whereas a person who drives a limousine or a car for a livery service is a “chauffeur.” “Chauffeur,” a formality of the higher classes, implies that one is subservient--a kind of butler-- but behind the wheel. The Garons may

be correct in stating that the ride is a reference to a “lover” and “sexual activity,” but the kind of “ride” and “rider” Minnie portrays in this piece shows that she is imposing a power structure between female and male relations. As we will come to see, Minnie uses “chauffeur” as a synonym for husband or long-term boyfriend as well.

Minnie’s word choice is also revealing when she says that she doesn’t want her chauffeur to be “riding the girls.” Throughout the piece, Minnie says that her chauffeur “drives” her around, but when she refers to the other girls she says “riding.” “Driving” implies a subservient quality. Even though the chauffeur has command of the wheel in the front seat, he takes a “back seat,” if you will, to Minnie’s travel requests. “Riding” implies that the chauffeur is exuding the dominant action, such as one who rides a horse. In that situation, the chauffeur is the director of action. She will not have it, for she wants to have power over the “chauffeur” and be his sole focus of attention. Minnie’s distinction between the two words--“rider” and “driver”--may harken back to her usage of “chauffeur.” She does not call him a driver or a rider because his status would diminish and so would hers. Minnie is like royalty for she is being “driven” around by a “chauffeur,” a service commonly associated with the affluent. She is not just a “rider” like the other girls, whom the chauffeur is just using for a good time.

However, there is a dichotomy occurring in stanza one. Minnie wants the “chauffeur” to serve a dual purpose: he serves her, which is where she exerts her power. However, she can’t resist his services, which is her weakness. She wants her chauffeur to “drive me downtown,” but she also “can’t turn him down” because he “says he drives so easy.” Here, it seems that Minnie’s metaphor for the “chauffeur” as a husband or a long-term boyfriend shines thorough, for she appears to have an attachment to the “chauffeur.” The effect of this line produces what Lieb would call an interplay between “independence and dependence” or “power and weakness” (Lieb

87). Even though this line may be seen as a weakness, which it is to a large extent, it may also further illustrate that Minnie does not want give up her advantages in this relationship. In other words, she “can’t turn him down” because he meets her requests. It would be a crime to part with such service.

In stanza two, Minnie lays the ground rules and she uses a “threat” to do so. Minnie states “but I don’t want him, to be riding these girls.” She is implying that she does not want her “chauffeur” to pleasure other women. However, this command is not enough; Minnie must “steal me a pistol, shoot my chauffeur down” if he doesn’t abide by her rules. As with “Biting Bug Blues,” which will be analyzed later in this chapter, Minnie’s pistol is a symbol of assertion. She takes control over her chauffeur’s behaviors and her desire for control arises out of her disapproval of his actions with other women.

Since pistols are tropes found within blues women’s songs, it is worth turning to Rainey to further explain Minnie’s use of the object in this song. For instance, in “See See Rider Blues,” Rainey says, “I’m gonna buy me a pistol, just as long as I am tall, Gonna kill my man and catch the Cannonball.” Lieb states that this is an example of how Rainey “threatens murder” (Lieb 116). By speaking in the future with her use of “gonna,” which is the same word-choice that Rainey uses, Minnie’s line “so I’m gonna steal me a pistol, shoot my chauffeur down” may be an example of how Minnie herself “threatens murder.” Minnie is slightly brasher though, for she “steals” a pistol, rather than “buys” one (which is what Rainey does).

Conversely, Rainey says that she is going to “kill” her man, whereas Minnie “shoots him down.” Rainey gets rid of her “rider” by killing him, which is instantaneous and shows that Rainey has more exertion of power than Minnie just “shooting him down.” However, Minnie executes more of a threat and a chase. For instance, if she lets her chauffeur live, he will

remember her actions of “shooting him down.” That means Minnie is doing two interesting things here: one, if she is mad enough, she can kill her chauffeur with her pistol and two, if she wants to keep him around, she can “shoot him down,” which implies a hit or miss chase. The latter presupposes that she can get the best of both worlds; she can teach him a lesson, which shows her superiority, and she can keep him around so he can still be her “little boy.”

Minnie’s threatening chase, her attention to teaching a lesson and punishment, and her use of the same tool, a pistol, shows that she may be using a thought-out plan to get what she wants, even in the act of stealing. In fact, conversely, this act of “stealing” may not be as impulsive as we think. If Minnie chooses to kill her “chauffeur” with a stolen pistol, she may not be implicated because the pistol does not belong to her. Minnie’s plan may be to fake innocence, but still get what she wants.

Minnie moves from threats to bribes in stanza three. She wants to buy her chauffeur a “brand new V-8 Ford” so “he won’t need any passengers” (but her). Minnie appears to be desperate here. Minnie realizes that a new car instills pride, and her chauffeur would be proud to be driving her around in a new “V-8 Ford.” Minnie is being logical too; if she buys him a Ford, she will be his “only load.” She also doesn’t simply say she wants to buy her chauffeur a car so he can be alone with her, but she wants to buy him a car so “he won’t need no passengers.” Therefore, Minnie is evaluating this situation in a give-or-take kind of manner. This shows that Minnie is manipulating her chauffeur by initiating a bribe. She is not desperate to get what she wants, but instead, she is being craftily assertive by giving him what he wants; a “V-8 Ford.”

On the contrary, Minnie may also be downplaying her chauffeur. If one considers the type of car that Minnie refers to and compares it to other cars that appear in her other songs, Minnie’s choice of car brand is deliberate, for a Ford is not as fancy as a Cadillac. For instance,

“Garage Fire Blues,” which was one of two songs that Minnie recorded with her Jug Band (aka Jed Davenport and His Beale Street Jug Band) in 1930 for Vocalion Records, while not a major hit by any means, is indeed “richly textured” (Garon 272) with thematic occurrences that show up in Minnie’s later work, most specifically 1941’s “Me and My Chauffeur Blues.”

My house's on fire, where's the fire wagon now?
 My house's on fire, where's the fire wagon now?
 Ain't but the one thing, I don't want my garage to burn down

I got a Hudson Super Six, I gotta big old model Cadillac 8
 I got a Hudson Super Six, I gotta big old model Cadillac 8
 I woke up this morning, my Cadillac standing at my back gate

Oh, boys, boys, I got the best chauffeur in town
 Oh, boys, boys, I got the best chauffeur in town
 He saved my Hudson Super Six, my Cadillac didn't get burned down

Oh, lord, lord, wonder where is my chauffeur now?
 Oh, lord, lord, wonder where is my chauffeur now?
 'Cause my Cadillac 8 done Cadillac'd out of town

I tell the whole wide world, I ain't gonna walk no more
 I tell the whole wide world, I ain't gonna walk no more
 I got a Cadillac 8, take me anywhere I want to go

(Garage Fire Blues-1930)

Minnie’s main cause for concern in this piece is the fact that that her garage is on fire. She does not want it to “burn down.” Oddly though, if anyone is to be concerned about a garage, it’s typically a man, since he is usually thought to be involved more with traveling and cars. Minnie is concerned because the garage houses two cars, one expensive Cadillac 8 and one mid-priced Hudson Super Six. I mention the qualitative cost of each car because it appears that Minnie does not refer to random cars in her songs. For instance, in “Me and My Chauffeur Blues,” Minnie refers to a V-8 Ford, which is a cheaper car than this Hudson or Cadillac. So, by referring to a Ford, Minnie may also be saying that her chauffeur would not have any passengers

because he is driving around in cheap car, not some fancy Cadillac or Hudson. Minnie is not only dictating her chauffeur's actions through her aforementioned threats, but also her conscious choice of vehicle, which may restrict his actions due to its brand.

Another aspect that points to Minnie's careful thought process in "Me and My Chauffeur Blues" is the structure of each stanza. Minnie adds a qualifier to every stanza's fourth line by expounding on each stanza's third line. For instance, "downtown," "around," "Ford," and "world" are added to repeated phrases such as "I wants him to drive me" in each stanza's fourth line. Since this structure differs from the traditional blues pattern which relies on an AAB structure where the first two lines are repeated, it can be inferred that Minnie's methods for songwriting are for a specific effect. Minnie holds back the qualifier because she is thinking, deliberating, screening what she can say next. In other words, she is being very cautious, for she doesn't want a repeat occurrence of "Garage Fire Blues." Minnie says she wants to buy her chauffeur "a brand new V-8/A brand new V-8 Ford." The line break occurs after V-8. Similarly, in one of the preceding stanzas, she says, "I wants him to drive me/I wants him to drive me downtown." By adding "downtown" as what appears to be an additional thought, Minnie brings a different connotation to "drives me." She specifically wants her chauffeur to drive her to an area typically thought of for special occasions, and a place for the high class and ritzy. The deliberate pause in those lines denotes that she is being careful this time around, rather than careless.

In the last two lines in the last stanza of "Me and My Chauffeur Blues," which read, "Then he can be my little boy/Yes, I'll be his girl," Minnie's words exude a definite power dynamic. This power dynamic seems to cyclically coincide with the first stanza of the song where Minnie becomes an advocate for balanced power. Minnie calls her chauffeur her "little

boy,” and she also refers to herself as “girl,” not “little girl.” Usually, a woman will refer to her lover as her “man.” By saying that her chauffeur is her “little boy” she is also saying that she has dominance over him, which coincides with the rest of the piece.

BITING BUG

Just a biting bug been following me everywhere I go,
 Just a biting bug been following me everywhere I go,
 I'm gonna kill that biting bug, so she won't follow me no more.

Just a biting bug been following me from town to town,
 Just a biting bug been following me from town to town,
 Yes, she kept on a following me, till my good man have done put me down.

I woke up this morning and that biting bug was in my bed,
 I woke up this morning and that biting bug was in my bed,
 Till I taken my pistol and I shot that biting bug dead

Hmmm, I won't be worried with that biting bug no more
 Hmmm, I won't be worried with that biting bug no more,
 I done stopped that biting bug from following me everywhere I go.

Now you girls don't have to worry, because that biting bug is gone
 Now you girls don't have to worry, because that biting bug is gone,
 I done stopped that biting bug from breaking up other women's homes.

(Biting Bug Blues-1936)

The bothersome “biting bug” that plagues Minnie’s song could be interpreted as just a pesky insect. In considering the first two lines by themselves, one may think that the bug is a metaphor for an overly-attached, pesky male admirer, one that “bites” or annoys, and from Minnie’s viewpoint, “follow[s] me everywhere I go.” The first part of the last line conveys Minnie’s disdain for his peskiness; for she says she would “kill” the creature. However, when Minnie genders the bug in the last half of line three by saying “she won’t follow me no more,” the “biting bug” changes into a metaphor for an overly-attached, pesky female admirer.

If the bug were male, one would think that it was an admirer of Minnie's. Instead, this female bug is an admirer of Minnie's "good man." The bug's desire is to "follow," in other words, pester Minnie until her "good man have done put [her] down" and the bug can have her man. The "bed," which is usually in a home setting, a bedroom, and is the place for sexual intercourse, functions as a symbol for sexual exclusivity, where Minnie can claim her man. That's why Minnie turns to violence when she sees the bug in her bed. Minnie says, "Till I taken my pistol and I shot that biting bug dead." The causal and effectual contrast in this stanza conveys the quickness with which Minnie resorts to "resolving" a situation. Although Davis refers to this type of "violence" as a response to male abuse when she says "an independent woman of blues lore do not think twice about wielding weapons against men who they feel have mistreated them...they do not perceive or define themselves as powerless in the face of such violence" (Davis 34), it wouldn't be too far-fetched to apply her idea here as well. Minnie is the "victim" of a female "biting bug" and she is showing "resistance" and power by bringing out a pistol (Davis 29). Minnie may not be thwarting male abuse, but she is thwarting an opposing force. She gets rids of that force by self-assertive violence: keeping "that biting bug from following me everywhere I go." Therefore, if one wanted to push Minnie actions even further, one could say that Minnie is one of the "independent women who were afraid neither of their own vulnerability nor of defending their right to be respected as autonomous" (Davis 41). Minnie "defend[s] [her] right to be respected as autonomous" because she confronts the bug due to what she was doing with her man.

Yet, is Minnie only working for the betterment of her self-interest here? Actually, it appears that Minnie is working for the betterment of a sisterhood which she refers to as "you girls." Minnie acts as if she can be the overseer for other women's well-being when she says,

“Now you girls don’t have to worry...I done stopped that biting bug from breaking up other women’s homes” Her turning point with the pistol, which was out of self-interest, and boldness, also seems to be a charitable and generous act. None of her fellow women have to “worry;” Minnie fixed their problems by killing the bug.

This song is Minnie’s version of what Davis would call an “advice song.” Davis states that “one of the principal modes of community building in women’s blues is that of sharing experiences for the purpose of instructing women how to conduct their lives” and she says that such a song can “advise women how to avoid triangular entanglements and how to keep other women from eyeing their men” (Davis 53). Her “triangular entanglement” consists of the “biting bug,” her “good man,” and herself. She shows how other women can get rid of such a “bug” (pistol) in their own lives, by “sharing experiences.” Minnie assumes this combined role of mentor and caretaker, showing “you girls” how to keep those “other women” (biting bugs) from “eyeing their men.” Consequently, even though Davis typically associates such “advice songs” with singers like Smith and Rainey, specifically their “Lookin’ for My Man Blues”, and “Trust No Man” lyrics (Davis 55), Minnie certainly uses similar strategies as well.

In addition, Minnie is also evoking what Davis would label as “call and response” (Davis 56). While usually thought of as a singing technique between two groups or individuals, Minnie’s use of “you girls” allows “a vast array of individual women to locate themselves within a blues community without having to abstract themselves from their personal lives” (Davis 56). Davis’ renderings of the term “call and response,” adheres to what black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins labels as “call and response” as well. She states that it is a “composed of spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interactions between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker’s statements, or “calls,” are punctuated by expressions, or “responses,” from the listener,

this black discourse mode pervades African American culture. The fundamental requirement of this interactive network is active participation of individuals. For ideas to be tested and validated everyone in the group must participate” (Collins 213). In this song, the “nonverbal action” is avoiding another encounter with the biting bug. Minnie’s evocation of “you girls,” and “women’s home,” encourages the participation of “everyone in the group.” So, as Davis says, individual feelings are not negated (Davis 57), but encouraged.

TRIBUTE TO MA RAINEY

I was thinking about Ma Rainey, wonder where could Ma Rainey be
 I was thinking about Ma Rainey, wonder where could Ma Rainey be
 I been looking for her, even been 'n old Tennessee

She was born in Georgia, traveled all over this world
 She was born in Georgia, traveled all over this world
 And she's the best blues singer, peoples, I ever heard
 When she made Bo Weavil Blues, I was living way down the line
 When she made Bo Weavil Blues, I was living way down the line
 Every time I hear that record, I just couldn't keep from crying
 Hmmm, hmmm
 Hmmm, hmmm
 Hmmm, hmmm
 People it sure look lonesome since Ma Rainey been gone
 People it sure look lonesome since Ma Rainey been gone
 But she left little Minnie to carry the good works on

(Ma Rainey-1940)

Minnie recorded this song six months after Rainey’s passing, and unlike the other songs explored in this chapter, which convey a theme present in many of Minnie’s works, this song is significant because it shows that Minnie considered herself to be a torchbearer for Ma Rainey’s legacy: “but she left little Minnie to carry the good works on.” According to the Garons, “where the singers mention their own names, we hear the desire to be known, to leave traces, to live in

people's memories" (Garon 225). The fact that Minnie situates herself within the canon of blues women singers as a country blues artist, so much so that she believes Rainey left her to "carry to the good works on" is highly significant. This means that despite the fact that blues scholarship separates Minnie from the blues women singers, Minnie did not think she was all that removed from their influence. "Classic" blues must have meant something different to Minnie than it did to scholars, thus it is unfair to separate Minnie's contributions to feminist blues discourse from the blues women singers because evidently Minnie thinks they share a common lineage.

Oddly, Minnie chose to write a tribute to Rainey and not another blues woman singer like Bessie Smith. Indeed, Rainey had just passed away, but it's still worth wondering why Minnie specifically chose Rainey. Was it because Rainey was said to have more country blues tendencies? Was it because, Rainey, like Minnie, wrote a great deal of her songs? This song is not detailed enough to provide sufficient proof for either question; however, it's clear that Minnie had an emotional connection to Rainey, for when she "was living down the line" she "just couldn't keep from crying" every time she heard Rainey's "Bo Weevil Blues." Therefore, Minnie felt as if she was connected to the blues women singers, even though she was a guitarist.

Chapter Three

Married Duets

*Now when she got down to Memphis,
She met Kansas Joe,
He said, "Now, listen girl, you ain't alone no more.*

--Del Rey

More than ten years before her first recordings, Minnie collaborated with guitarist Willie Brown around 1915. Minnie and Brown provided entertainment for ferry-boat rides on Lake Cormorant, for storekeepers, and for the occasional white party in the Bedford, Mississippi area. Vocal duties often varied between the pair, but one aspect remained constant: Minnie played lead guitar consisting of single note lines while Brown provided accompanying rhythm guitar with either bass lines or chords behind her. As mentioned in my introduction, but worth reemphasizing here, Minnie did not adhere to conventions by assuming this lead role-- rather, she was able to "assume a musical identity that before her time had been achieved mostly by males" (Garon 34). Indeed, most of Minnie's contemporaries were men, like Lonnie Johnson and Big Bill Broonzy, and only a handful of blues women during this time such as Mattie Delaney and Ethel McCoy²⁸, even accompanied themselves on guitar (Garon 33). Minnie, in contrast, did not only use the guitar as an accompanying instrument, she played lead, which was virtually unheard of for women of this time period. From this alone, we begin to see the unconventional approach that Minnie assumes in these musical partnerships. This unconventionality transpires again when considering her vocal duties as well, particularly those in collaboration with Kansas Joe McCoy. Minnie would use this template as her act--Minnie on lead guitar, spouse or male contemporary on rhythm guitar--for each of her subsequent guitar partnerships. Following her years with Brown, Minnie teamed up with another performer in Memphis, Tennessee in the early

²⁸ Not related to Kansas Joe McCoy.

1920s, vocalist, guitarist, and eventual first husband, Kansas Joe McCoy. She would make the first recordings of her career with him in 1929. From the late 1930s through the early 1950s, Minnie teamed up with vocalist, guitarist, and again, husband, Son Joe Lawlars. Since this partnership occurred during the time of Minnie's career where she recorded with a three or four piece studio band consisting of either bass, drums, or piano and since these sessions, in comparison to her earlier duet recordings with Kansas Joe, produced less intricate guitar exchanges between spouses and less vocal duets, I will be focusing chiefly on Minnie's recordings with Kansas Joe.

Minnie and Kansas Joe established a husband and wife dynamic that was unheard of in the world of country blues at the time. If there were to be duets in country blues at all, it would often be between two men a la Eddie Lang on guitar and Lonnie Johnson on guitar. This isn't to say that collaborations between men and women didn't exist--the 1920s duets between Lonnie Johnson on guitar and vocals and Victoria Spivey on vocals come to mind--however, the difference here is that Minnie and Kansas Joe were *married*. Consequently, the subject matter of their songs and the spousal roles they played in their recorded performances, from ordinary couple to Minnie having power over Kansas Joe, produced duets that neither the country blues of the time nor the "Classic" women's blues of yesteryear had ever heard before. As a result, Minnie's collaborations with Kansas Joe would prove to be the most significant partnership in her career because her proto-feminist tendencies were executed with the most fervor. Minnie dictates the direction of these duets by effectuating what she wants, downplaying her husband's pleas and using marriage to her advantage. She redefines what it means to be a wife.

Davis states that “the protagonists in women’s blues are seldom wives and almost never mothers” (Davis 12) and “the female figures evoked in women’s blues are independent women free of the domestic orthodoxy of the prevailing representations of womanhood through which female subjects of the era were constructed” (Davis 13). Similarly, Harrison, in her list of themes found in women’s blues, omits, as Davis points out, “husbands” and “marriage” (Davis 13). Both Davis and Harrison claim that classic blues women singers did not acknowledge marriage, focusing instead on sexually liberating themes such as “promiscuity,” “homosexuality,” and “travel” (Davis 13). Although Davis and Harrison base these observations off their analyses of “Classic” blues women singers²⁹, it’s worth noting that Minnie was quite the exception to their generalizations. Minnie was not shy about highlighting her status as a married woman, for she often used it to put forth her agenda or establish a power dynamic (where she would have power over her husband). Her lyrics directly refuted what her husband had to say and in some cases, even ignored him. In so doing, Minnie’s performances as a married woman could be empowering, often redefining spousal gender roles in the process.

Davis assumes that if a woman blues singer included marriage in her songs, she would be succumbing to the “patriarchal” and “confining” aspects of the “institution” of marriage (Davis 11-15). It is only through instances such as Rainey’s “[refusal] to privilege marriage over non or extramarital sexual partnerships” in her “Blame it on the Blues”³⁰ or her advice song, “Misery

²⁹ Davis bases her findings off Smith and Rainey only, while Harrison includes many other women in her book, *Black Pearls*.

³⁰ An excerpt from the piece: “Can’t blame my mother, can’t blame my dad/Can’t blame my brother for the trouble I’ve had/Can’t blame my lover that held my hand/Can’t blame my husband, can’t blame my man” (Davis 15).

Blues,”³¹ warning women to stay away from the oppressive “institution” of marriage, that women can be in “control” of their relationships (Davis 14). This is false, especially if one takes Minnie’s duets with Kansas Joe into account. Unfortunately, due to the fact that Davis falls into the trap of focusing solely on canonical blues women singers and basing her analysis off 1970s feminist ideologies, her analysis is only a generalization. Marriage inherently assumes prescribed rules for a wife, such as subservience to her husband. In so doing, marriage also allows an independent woman like Minnie, who does not entirely comply by those rules, to stand out in a more audacious fashion than any woman blues performer who is professing to be single (or an advocate for that “single” way of life). Even though marriage is usually viewed as a barrier for blues women like Minnie, Minnie did not let marriage trap and confine her—rather, she allowed her boldness to shine through. Just like her lead guitar role in her musical partnerships, Minnie was not afraid to be atypical, defying convention and redefining gender roles in the process.

Even the Garons, who usually catch the nuances of Minnie’s work, fail to fully realize how striking Minnie’s duets are. They state that “if the duets are dialogues in which the dramas of everyday life are reenacted, it is the singer’s specific comprehension of her role as singing subject, no longer just an object that represents an important step in the poetic assault on consciousness” (Garon 33). It is not simply Minnie’s “comprehension of her role as singing subject” that makes these duets significant. Minnie’s “comprehension” enables her to redefine her role as a wife, for she dictates the direction of these conversations and she is the one who gets what she wants on her own terms, while her husband’s influence is downplayed. Due to the limited scope of this thesis, as with my previous chapter, I will not be able to analyze the lyrics

³¹ An excerpt from the piece: “ He told me that he loved me, loved me so/If I would marry him, I needn’t to work no mo’/Now I’m grievin’, almost dyin’/Just because I didn’t know that he was lyin’” (Davis 16).

contained in all of Minnie's duets with Kansas Joe, but I will analyze the two songs that I think are most important: "Can I Do It For You?-Pt. 2" and "What Fault You Find of Me-Pt. 1." Both songs were recorded in 1930 for Vocalion records in Memphis, Tennessee.

CAN I DO IT FOR YOU?

KJ³²: I'll buy your wood and coal, buy your wood and coal
Buy your wood and coal, if I can do something to you
Hear me saying, I want to do something to you

MM³³: I don't want no wood and coal, I don't want no wood and coal
I don't want nothing in the world you got and you can't do nothing for me
Hear me saying, you can't do nothing for me

KJ: Buy your shoes and clothes, buy your shoes and clothes
Buy your shoes and clothes, if I can do something to you
Hear me saying, I want to do something to you

MM: I don't want no shoes and clothes, I don't want no shoes and clothes
I don't want nothing in the world you got, and can't do nothing for me
Hear me saying, you can't do nothing for me

KJ: I'll buy you a Chevrolet, I'll buy you a Chevrolet
Buy you a Chevrolet, if I can do something to you
Hear me saying, I want to do something to you

MM: I don't want no Chevrolet, I don't want no Chevrolet
I don't want nothing in the world you got, and you can't do nothing for me
Hear me saying, you can't do nothing for me

KJ:
Buy you a baby calf, buy you a baby calf
Buy you a baby calf if I can do something to you
Hear me saying, if I can do something to you

MM:
I don't want no baby calf, I don't want no baby calf
I don't want nothing in the world you got, and you can't do nothing for me

³² Kansas Joe McCoy

³³ Memphis Minnie

Hear me saying, you can't do nothing for me

KJ:

Can I do something to you, can I do something to you?
Do anything in this world I can, if I can do something to you
Hear me saying, if I can do something to you

MM:

Naw, you can't do nothing to me, naw, you can't do nothing to me
I don't care what in the world you do, you can't do nothing to me
Hear me saying, you can't do something to me

KJ:

Buy you a sedan Ford, buy you a sedan Ford
Buy you a sedan Ford, if I can do something to you
Hear me saying, if I can do something to you

MM:

I will take a sedan Ford, yes, I will take a sedan Ford
I don't want nothing in the world you got but I will take a sedan Ford
Hear me saying, I'll take a sedan Ford

(Can I Do It For You? Pt. 2-1930)

Perhaps the first thing one notices about this piece is that Minnie and her husband are playing “tug of war.” As the Garons state about another piece of Minnie and Kansas Joe’s, but which is applicable here, “each [artist] can also been seen as trying to seize power from the other” (Garon 237). Kansas Joe assumes the role of the helpful husband, offering to buy Minnie’s wood and coal, baby calf, shoes and clothes, and a Chevrolet. Minnie assumes the role of the finicky yet commanding wife who does not want or need anything her husband offers her (except for the sedan Ford). By being forthright with her rejections, Minnie makes her husband’s offers seem inconsequential and irrelevant. In this way, Minnie fits the Garons’ description perfectly, for she plays “the dominant role in an erotic relationship, difficult to please...” (Garon 233). Indeed, even though Kansas Joe is persistent and Minnie does eventually agree to accept

his sedan Ford, Minnie determines the direction of this piece. She gets exactly what she wants and Kansas Joe just desperately throws out offer after offer to no avail.

One of the ways in which Minnie determines the direction of this piece is through directly refuting Kansas Joe's offers. Minnie does not simply say that Kansas Joe cannot do anything for her; she repeats what he says *exactly*, but in a *negative* fashion. For instance, Kansas Joe will say, "Can I do something to you, can I do something to you?" and Minnie will respond, "Naw, you can't do nothing to me, naw, you can't do nothing to me." Minnie's exactness could be interpreted in various ways, but she seems to be mocking Kansas Joe in the same sarcastic way that small children often do during game play, where one mimics the other. However, the fact that Minnie's response is both a copy *and* rejection of Kansas Joe's words means that she is doing two things: she is trying to be an annoyance, which is evident in her copying, but she is also taking command by telling him what she wants: nothing. She does not even say what she would prefer instead. Even when Kansas Joe changes his line from "buy you" to his question of "can I do something to you?" in stanza nine, Minnie's responses remain intransigent. She could easily say, "I would like you to do this to me," but she does not.

Kansas Joe's word choice may have a sexual connotation as well. "Can I do something to you?" may be an attempt by Kansas Joe trying to seduce Minnie sexually. "To" is more direct and physical, while "for" is more passive and receptive. Nevertheless, Minnie's responses, which are patterned after Kansas Joe's questions, show again that he cannot do "nothing." Minnie's resistance to this sexual lure shows that she is again inhabiting the "dominant role in an erotic relationship" (Garon 233). No matter what role Kansas Joe depicts here, the helpful or the sexual, Minnie's reactions shoot him down all the same; she will have none of it.

Most of the objects that Minnie rejects are domestic. The baby calf, coal, wood, shoes, and clothing are typical items found in one's house or on one's property. It is not clear whether Minnie rejects these items for their domestic properties, but in comparison to what she accepts, this may be a plausible explanation. The only object Minnie accepts in this entire piece is the sedan Ford. While coal and wood, for instance, are used to heat a house in anticipation that one will spend a good amount of time in it, a car, conversely, unless it needs repair, is what allows one to *leave* her home. Minnie's rejection of the other domestic items makes sense then given her desire for mobility. Minnie puts an importance on travel and as the Garons state, "demonstrates her desire for [the] object which is most symbolically useful..." (Garon 233).

This gives way to Minnie's choice of the sedan Ford over the Chevrolet. While one may think Minnie is just being arbitrarily finicky by picking one car over the other, she is actually making quite a conscious decision here. The Garons point out that a sedan Ford was considered "top-of-the line" during this era (Garon 233). Minnie's desire for a luxury car proves that Minnie does not just want a car, but she wants a car that she can cruise around in as if she were wealthy. It is worth noticing, also, that this is one of the few instances in which Minnie alludes to advancing her own mobility without the use of a "chauffeur"³⁴ or other driver. Kansas Joe says that he will "buy [her] a sedan Ford" and Minnie makes no mention of him, or anyone else, driving her around in it. Therefore, this may be another reason why Minnie takes advantage of the opportunity to have a luxury car because *she* will be the one driving it.

Additionally, even though Minnie "takes" Kansas Joe's sedan Ford, this stanza stays true to the rest of the piece. Minnie states, "I don't want nothing in the world you got, but I will take your sedan Ford." This shows that Minnie does not ecstatically accept this car. She'll take it, but

³⁴ As in "Me and My Chauffeur Blues."

she still doesn't "want anything in the world you got." In other words, Kansas Joe convinces Minnie to finally take something, but did *he* really convince her? Her level-headedness here shows, once again, that Minnie is exerting her power. She is not admitting to the fact that she finally takes something from Kansas Joe, at least in the sense the *he* convinced her to take it; instead, she plays it cool as if the only person that informs her decision to take that car is Minnie herself.

The Garons state, while describing the roles that Minnie and Kansas Joe take during their duets, that "the other would plead, bribe, and cajole, finally succeeding (as Joe does in "Can I Do it For You?")" (Garon 233). I would argue that Kansas Joe does not really succeed here though. If Minnie accepted his offer of coal or clothes, he would have succeeded. Since Kansas Joe makes an offer of two cars in this song and Minnie rejects one but accepts the other, she is the one who is really succeeding here. Kansas Joe is not making her an offer that she can't refuse. Minnie is choosing which offer to accept. Also, she chooses an object that ultimately benefits her needs and overall image, so she puts a lot of thought into her choice.

Furthermore, by refraining from completely denouncing marital roles and interacting naturally as a couple, Minnie is able to emerge as a powerful, albeit finicky wife who is able to communicate her own desires. Her power is fully realized in the moments where she is stepping outside the boundaries, like systematically choosing the sedan Ford over the Chevrolet.

WHAT FAULT YOU FIND OF ME?

KJ:
 Worked all summer and I worked all fall
 Had take my Christmas in my overalls
 Now I've got tired the way you treated me

And I believe I'll go now, back to my used to be

MM:

Well, you know I love you baby, I can't help myself
I'd rather be with you than anyone else
Lord, tell me baby, what fault you find of me?
Ah, that you want to quit me, baby, for your old time used to be

KJ:

When I had you, wouldn't treat me right
Stay out from me both day and night
Now I've got tired the way you treated me
And I believe I'll go now, back to my used to be

MM:

I been wondering, I been wondering, I can't see to save my life
How come we can't get along like man and wife
Now I've got tired the way you treated me
And I believe I'll go now, back to my used to be

KJ:

Went to your house about half past ten
Knocked on your door, you wouldn't let me in
I've got tired the way you treated me
And I believe I'll go now, back to my used to be

(What Fault You Find of Me-Pt. 1-1930)

The Garons state quite appropriately that “Minnie’s replies are never specific answers to Joe’s complaints” and that “her verses have little to do with Joe’s, and it’s almost as if each had written their own verses or their own song privately, with little or no knowledge of the other” (Garon 229-230). In the first stanza, Kansas Joe talks about working all summer and winter. He feels like he has not gotten enough respect for his efforts, and as result, he will go “back to [his] used to be.” Even though Kansas Joe has just stated why he will go back to his “used to be,” Minnie still asks, “lord, tell me baby, what fault you find of me?” It appears that Minnie did not even listen to Kansas Joe’s initial line, where he already answers her question. Also, Minnie’s initial stanza is odd in the sense that Minnie does not try to remedy the situation. She just

rambles about how she loves her baby, and that she can't help herself. She could have said that she mistreated Kansas Joe for a specific reason, but she does not even remotely address his comment.

Kansas Joe states that when he was with Minnie, she "wouldn't treat me right/ stay out from me both day and night." However, again, Minnie responds as if she is not even listening. She says, as if in a day-dream, that "I been wondering, I can't see to save my life/How come we can't get along like man and wife." She again ignores the fact that Kansas Joe is being accusatory when he says that Minnie "stay out from me both day and night. " This is a perfect opportunity for Minnie to interject a response that backs up her earlier claim that she would rather not be with anyone else.

It is clear that "Joe's verses lead obviously in one direction and intentionally in one direction while Minnie intentionally opposes him..." (Garon 230). The distinction that the Garons draw here is fairly accurate. Minnie is the one who "intentionally opposes" rather than the other way around. However, the Garons' phrase "intentionally opposes" is not entirely appropriate, for Minnie does not "oppose" per say; she ignores. Minnie has numerous opportunities to "oppose" Kansas Joe's words by saying what she actually wants or why their relationship is not working out; instead, Minnie chooses to say most anything that comes to mind. She is not letting Kansas Joe facilitate the conversation, hence her own agenda is more important than his. Therefore, Minnie pointedly acts as if Kansas Joe did not even speak. The Garons' claim that this is a function of blues duets where two singers alternate verses and the two singers create "separate songs" (Garon 230), however, I would argue that Minnie does not just simply create her own "separate" song here. She operates as if her song is the only one playing, which is evident in the way she *ignores* Kansas Joe.

Minnie's responses exert even more of a power dynamic when one brings in the scholarship of Nancy Henley³⁵. The Garons incorporate her work into their chapter on *Duets* as a way to explain Minnie's odd responses. They say that "Minnie's success in this area can be seen against the fact that in normal conversation women are "eminently interruptible" as well as unlikely to interrupt others" (Garon 237). This is interesting because Minnie is not just exerting power with her odd responses, but she is also not succumbing to prescribed gender roles either. Minnie "interrupts" Kansas Joe throughout this whole piece by not acknowledging anything he says. Consequently, she is not the one who is "eminently interruptible," her husband is.

Minnie is not assuming a passive role in these duet performances. She uses her marriage to her advantage, planning her responses accordingly. Whether Minnie's verses involve a car or illustrate her detachment, one thing is clear, she is exerting power over her husband. He is not dictating the direction of these pieces. Since Minnie adds a new dimension to these marital roles in women's blues, at least those related to us by Davis, Minnie defies prescribed blues gender norms. Marriage is not a detriment, instead, it is an advantage for Minnie, showing once again what a bold performer she was.

The last aspect worth mentioning in regard to Minnie's duets with Kansas Joe is that even though their duets were sometimes "comic" and "no doubt derived from the vaudeville tradition," they contained none of the "naughty," "cute" and "coy" characteristics associated with vaudeville (Garon 228). By "vaudeville," the Garons refer to the style that the classic women blues singers adopted in the 1920s. As youths, they were trained in a show-business, stage production setting, participating in various tent shows and traveling troupes around the United States. As previously mentioned, Minnie is also cut of the same show-business cloth having

³⁵ Henley, Nancy M., *Body Politics*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall 1977, pg. 74.

joined the Ringling Brothers circus around 1917. However, Minnie does not let the vaudevillian influence slip into her music nearly as much as the “Classic” blues women singers. As a result, Minnie’s duets are richer, not just because they are with her spouse or because she exerts power over him, but because her duets also seem more natural and plausible. Of course, in any instance, rehearsals probably took place, but Minnie’s duets seem to be rooted more in reality rather than show-biz. As a counter-example to Minnie’s duets, here’s an excerpt from Ma Rainey’s “Big Feeling Blues”³⁶, which was recorded in 1928 and featured the duo of Ma Rainey on vocals and Papa Charlie Jackson on banjo:

Charlie:

"If you're lookin' for a brown, come get this chocolate cream
I'm a big kid-man - just out of my teens"

Ma:

"All these many years I've been pleadin' for a man
How come I can't get me a real monkey man?
I'm not no triflin' woman

I've been lookin' for a man I can call my own
Been married many times but they left my home
Ah, big feelin' blues, worst I ever had
I've got the big feelin' blues I mean I've got them bad"

(Big Feeling Blues-1928)

Rainey and Jackson’s word choice alone show that these duets produce a different feel than Minnie’s duets with Kansas Joe. Jackson’s use of “chocolate cream” is almost cartoonish while Rainey’s use of “I’m not no triflin’ woman” seems to be drawn from a stock set of blues phrases like “I woke up this mornin’.” The closest Kansas Joe and Minnie arrive at using stock blues phrases is “I’ve got tired of the way you treated me” and they certainly do not refer to themselves

³⁶ I realize many examples can be used here; however, Rainey’s song illustrates the quotidian “Classic” blues woman singer duet between males and females.

in the playful, whimsical way that Jackson and Rainey do. For instance, in another one of their duets, “What’s the Matter With The Mill,” Kansas Joe and Minnie refer to each other simply by their stage names only.

Rainey also does not assume a unique gender role here whatsoever. She is looking for a man so she does not have the “big feelin’ blues” so “bad.” Minnie, on the other hand, says that her husband cannot do anything for her in one song and completely ignores him in the other. She even admits that she wishes they would be a better couple in “What Fault You Find of Me,” but that is the closest Minnie gets to admitting how her relationship is, whereas Rainey devotes her whole song to finding a good relationship. Additionally, Jackson responds in a flirtatious way, telling Rainey he has what she needs. Kansas Joe does not do this in his duets with Minnie, he only asks her what he can do for her. He never tells her that he is her “chocolate cream.” Compared to Rainey’s song, Minnie and Kansas Joe are not as conventional as Rainey and Jackson, even when just considering their presentation.

What is lacking here in Rainey’s song is the interplay between a real husband and wife, and as such, the relationship between the two individuals is formulaic, the presentation being frankly a reflection of that as well. Rainey assumes the role of the stereotypical woman who needs a man to get her out of her “blues,” while Jackson has everything she needs and claims to be the solution to her problems. This scenario, mixed with the use of theatrical language and the fact that Rainey seems to be single, makes this piece seem trite. Minnie’s duets with Kansas Joe, conversely, show that Minnie and Joe are an unconventional married couple and their duets are more natural and fresh.

The noticeable contrast between Minnie’s work and that of the classic blues women singers is clear. Minnie’s duets are highly unconventional due to her use of marriage, her crafted

responses, and her use of subject matter. She is not a “trifflin woman” and Kansas Joe is not “chocolate cream”---rather they are wife and husband. Despite Davis’ claims, marriage allows Minnie to disregard restrictions due to gender and spousal roles, rendering her “duet Minnie” as a proto-feminist force to be reckoned with.

CONCLUSION

Minnie was an irrepressible, fiery feminist spirit. She was not afraid to break into a male domain and play guitar as good as any man. Her songwriting was unmatched in the way she took command in her songs, paid particular attention to word choice, and implemented her own agenda while ignoring and triumphing over her husband in her duets. She could win guitar duels against leading male blues guitar contemporaries without once doubting her ability or lacking confidence.

Minnie was a guitarist who did everything for herself; she played her own songs, wrote her own songs, played music the way she pleased. In every sense of the word, Minnie was truly a pioneer, for if she had not made her way into the recorded blues scene in 1929, blues guitar probably would have remained largely a male domain. Minnie made the guitar unsexed, brought the electric guitar to the forefront, and she did so with power, self-assertiveness, and most importantly, fearlessness.

Unfortunately, even though Minnie proves time and time again (not just in this thesis, but throughout her career) that she was an important figure in blues history, her legacy is still suffocated by the grip of unjust marginalization. It is clear that much work has yet to be done in remedying the flaws in blues scholarship before more people realize that she, and all women blues guitarists alike, were important figures in blues history, women's history, and blues guitar history.

Blues scholarship, even at this late date, has still not done away with compartmentalization, sexism, and a crude infatuation with downplaying the ability of women blues guitarists. Blues scholarship does not just need to be remedied for blues women guitarists' sake though. It needs to be remedied for the sake of accuracy. If leading scholars like Lomax

cannot even represent blues women guitarists in a proper light, imagine how many other people and genres he has overlooked and misrepresented in music history? It's a scary thought given the fact that this man was entrusted with performing an honest documentation of music history and often the person that most people turn to as a leading authority.

However, I am hopeful that blues scholarship will give women like Minnie their rightful due in the future. In some ways, it is already happening, even though the progress is still in its larval stages. In the mid-2000s, Gayle Wald, a professor at George Washington University, came out with a book which later inspired a PBS documentary: *Shout Sister Shout! The Untold Story of a Rock and Roll Trailblazer: Sister Rosetta Tharpe*. Sister Rosetta was a woman blues/gospel guitarist in the 1940s through the 1960s who was virtually unheard of until Wald brought her into focus.

It is my ultimate goal to bring justice to these blues women guitarists like Minnie, Geeshie Wiley, and Ethel McCoy, and others, through my research. Their contributions are too important to be ignored. As a blues woman guitarist myself, I feel like it is my duty to honor the legacy of these women who not only inspired me, but bravely paved a way for all women blues guitarists to come. Moreover, I hope this thesis inspires scholars and readers alike to slowly chip away and eventually do away with the marginalization of women blues guitarists.

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