

Memphis Minnie — Blues Giant

By Michael "Hawkeye" Herman

For those of you who are not aware of the woman who was among the first twenty performers elected to the Hall of Fame in the inaugural W.C. Handy Awards in 1980, who won the top female vocalist award in the first *Blues Unlimited* Readers' Poll in 1973 (finishing ahead of Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey), let me take a few moments to explain this woman's massive contribution to the blues.



Universally regarded as one of the greatest blues artists of all time, Memphis Minnie (1897-1973) wrote and recorded hundreds of songs, among them the famous, "Bumble Bee Blues," "Me and My Chauffeur," "Black Rat Swing," "I'm Talking About You," and "What's The Matter With The Mill?" Blues people as diverse as Muddy Waters, Koko Taylor, Johnny Shines, Big Mama Thornton, and Chuck Berry have acknowledged her as a major influence. 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. Thanks to her merciless imagination and dark humor, her songs rank among the most vigorous and challenging poetry in any language.

Although organized feminism was at its lowest ebb, 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 20's and 30's 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. Johnny Shines recalls, "Any men fool with her, she'd go for them right away. She didn't take no foolishness off of them." She was more than just a guitar hero. She was capable of modernizing her style and ably adapted to newer trends, which helped account for her years of popularity. Memphis Minnie was one of the few figures to make the successful transition from the rural, guitar dominated blues of the 1920's to the urban nightclub styles of the 1930's.

Born Lizzie "Kid" Douglas, in Algiers, Louisiana, on June 3rd, 1897, her family moved to Walls, Mississippi (just outside Memphis), in 1904. She was the oldest of thirteen children. She got her first guitar as a Christmas present in 1905, and began to teach herself to play. She ran away from home at the age of 13, and began to perform on the streets of Memphis, and neighboring communities, as "Kid" Douglas, eventually working in tent shows throughout the South for Ringling Brothers Circus. She settled in Memphis between 1916 and 1920, and began to play on Beale Street and in its saloons and bars. In her early years, she often played lead guitar and sang with Willie Brown and Willie Moore, two Delta blues heavy hitters who were pals of Son House, and mentors of Robert Johnson. While living in Memphis, she formed a partnership with Kansas City Joe McCoy, who became her husband. Her first recordings, in 1929, "Bumble Bee Blues" / "I'm Talking About You," were hits, and between 1929 and 1941 she was one of the most

prolific blues recording artists, producing over 150 songs. Her songs were even covered by the western-swing bands of Bob Wills, Milton Brown, and the Maddox Brothers and Rose. In 1930, she moved to Chicago, where she became a mainstay of the blues community. In Chicago, in 1933, she won first prize in a local blues singing contest over Big Bill Broonzy (!) with whom she would later tour. In 1935, she left Joe McCoy, and the tight guitar duet work they had created, and began working with rhythm sections on records designed for dancing and jukeboxes. In 1941, after she acquired an electric guitar, she had another major hit, "Me and My Chauffeur," which made all the jukeboxes, as well as the hit song, "Black Rat Swing." She remained active into the mid-1950's. She returned to Memphis, and in failing health, became inactive in music, confined to various local nursing homes. Memphis Minnie suffered a fatal stroke on August 6th, 1973. She is buried in New Hope Cemetery, Walls, Mississippi.

Sources:

1. *The Blues Who's Who*, by Sheldon Harris, Arlington House Pub., NY, NY.
2. *Nothing But the Blues*, by Lawrence Cohn, Abbeville Press, NY, NY.
3. *Woman With Guitar: Memphis Minnie's Blues*, by Paul and Beth Garon, DaCapo Press, NY, NY.