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# MEMPHIS MINNIE'S BLUES

by Paul & Beth Garon

New York: DaCapo, 1992

"*Woman with Guitar* is...a vivid portrait of a talented singer and guitarist. But it is much more than this... By an imaginative application...Paul and Beth Garon unpeel the layers of meaning in the themes and motifs of her lyrics. . . The authors have added a new dimension to blues scholarship." —Paul Oliver

"*Woman with Guitar* is a delight. The book is both thorough and brilliant, a rare combination these days. It is wide ranging and supported by astonishingly diverse and wise readings into psychoanalysis, feminism and Black studies. . ." —David Roediger

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(An excerpt from *Woman With Guitar: Memphis Minnie's Blues*)

At the dawn of the new decade, Minnie's popularity was hardly on the wane. Minnie, now with Son Joe, continued to work at the 708 Club at 708 E. 47th St., where they were often joined by Big Bill, Sunnyland Slim, or Snooky Pryor. The 708 was a favored hangout, recalled fondly by Pryor, who remembered that "it used to be right side of Montgomery Ward. Memphis Slim, he used to play there," and Pryor's partner, Moody Jones, remembered seeing Minnie at the 708 Club, too. The 708 was Minnie and Son's "home club," to the extent that they had one, and it was the tavern most frequently mentioned by Minnie and Son's compatriots.

But Minnie played at dozens of the better known (and better paying) night-clubs, from the Music Box and Club DeLisa to Martin's Corner, Gatewood's Tavern, and the White Elephant (Don's Den). Minnie and Memphis Slim played together at Gatewood's, especially when Big Bill was out of town, and she often played across the street from the White Elephant. As likely as not, she was joined by local musicians like Homer Harris or James "Beale Street" Clark; (the latter's home became the new rehearsal hall when Tampa Red "went nutty" after his wife died). Minnie was a regular participant in Chicago's blues milieu, a hard drinker who played just as hard. One night, she, Son Joe, and Sunnyland got drunk together, and in the wee hours of the morning, Sunnyland staggered home. The next day, and after a good, recuperative slumber, he went over to Little Brother Montgomery's. Lee Collins was there, and so were Minnie and Son, still partying! They hadn't been to bed since Sunnyland left them.

Son Joe, Minnie and Roosevelt Sykes occasionally played the midnight show at the Indiana Theatre, just as they played at the Square Deal and The Flame. While most singers had regular gigs at certain clubs—for Minnie, the 708 and Sylvio's—like most blues artists, she played at dozens of clubs with scores of colleagues. As Jimmy Rogers put it, after patiently explaining that he had seen Minnie playing in the basement at 31st and Indiana, as well as on the North side, "we was all around playing the blues in Chicago."

Poet Langston Hughes saw Minnie play at the 230 Club, and he was impressed enough to devote his entire *Chicago Defender* "Here to Yonder" column for January 9, 1943 to the occasion: ". . . Memphis Minnie sits on top of the icebox at the 230 Club in Chicago and beats out blues on an electric guitar. . ." Drummer Jump Jackson was with Minnie on the same job. "I worked with Memphis Minnie. I remember we was on, the little club at 51st and Prairie, way up on top of a icebox. Just drum and guitar. She had that place packed. You know those walk-in coolers? I said, 'Minnie, gee, I'm gonna work this week out, but I can't take this! I'm gonna fall and break my neck here.' They had a banister up there but if you'd fall against it, you'd go right through that thing. Fall right down on the people."

Disc jockey Big Bill Hill used to host a "cocktail party" that moved from club to club on Sundays: From the 708 Club to the Du Drop Lounge to Sylvio's to the Blue Flame. But there were other, more famous, parties for Chicago blues singers, and these were hosted by Memphis Minnie. These Blue Monday parties often took place at Ruby Lee Gatewood's, Big Bill's Lake Street home base. The parties were well attended and recalled with great pleasure, and Minnie herself memorialized them in her "Daybreak Blues"

Come daybreak in the morning,  
I'm gonna take the dirt road home.  
Wooo, soon daybreak in the morning,  
I'm gonna take the dirt road home.  
'Cause these Blue Monday blues is 'bout to kill me,  
sure as your born.

Well, this man pitches a party, every first of the week,  
I can't cross the floor for other people's feet.  
Come daybreak in the morning, etc.

Well, I went to my kitchen, intendin' to eat a bite.  
The table was crowded from morning till night.  
Come daybreak in the morning, etc.

*Spoken:* All right, Little Son Joe. Yes, I know. Keep on playing. I'll come home.

Hey, now I turned around, aimed to go to bed,  
There's four at the foot and six at the head.

Come daybreak in the morning, etc.

As Brother John Sellers recalled, "Memphis Minnie...really those Blue Monday parties in those days were too much. . . ! With all her greatness and her songs and her Blue Monday parties that she gave, she was...a singer to be remembered." Said J. B. Lenoir, "[Minnie] used to give cocktail parties, you know—those Blue Monday parties at the Gate, you know, and I actually found she would ask *me* to play a number for *her*."

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There is nothing wrong with seeing the blues singer as someone who plays while she works, as long as we understand that she also works while she plays. But beyond that, the blues singer—and Minnie is especially exemplary here—prefigures and prepares the dialectical resolution of the two. The abolition of work is the first big step toward the realization of poetry and freedom.

Minnie's attitude toward "the abolition of work" provides a fitting and emblematic closing for our study:

*Interviewer:* When she would visit you in Walls, was she ever interested in working, like on the farm, or. . .

*Daisy:* I never knowed her to go to a field, did you Ethel? [laughter]

*Ethel:* Naw. [laughter] Now, she would go out in the field and pick tomatoes and come home and cook 'em. Now, I don't know what she did before I knowed her.

*Daisy:* She didn't work then either! [laughter]

*Ethel:* She would really go out in the fields and pick tomatoes, and she loved to cook tomato dumplings.

*Daisy:* She was a good cook.

*Ethel:* Sweet tomato dumplings. And she would go out, and say, "Don't you all cut those tomatoes up." And she would cook, make the best tasting dumplings and every thing. But she not going to chop no cotton and pick no cotton. She stayed at the house. 'Kid' loved to cook, but she sure didn't do nothing else. . . much. [laughter] She'd stay here and practice on her songs.