

“Me and My Chauffeur Blues”—Memphis Minnie (1941)

Added to the National Registry: 2019

Essay by Paul Garon (guest post)*



Memphis Minnie

By the early 1940s, when Memphis Minnie cut her hit song, the African American music tradition of the blues, which had arisen in the early 1920s, was still going strong. Within that tradition, Minnie had developed a reputation as a stunning and popular blues entertainer. Her newest hit, “Me and My Chauffeur Blues,” recorded May 21, 1941, used the tune of “Good Morning School Girl,” cut in 1937 by Sonny Boy (John Lee) Williamson. She revitalized the melody, creating a song that Langston Hughes would go on to later call one of his favorites.

By that time, for years, record companies who recorded blues singers like Sonny Boy and Memphis Minnie had been releasing material marketed to African Americans on special numerical “race” series. This special numbering helped to point the dealers toward their target audience. Minnie’s, and her husband Joe McCoy’s, early records were issued on three different labels’ race series: Columbia’s 13/14000 series; Vocalion’s 1000 series and Decca 7000 series, where the couple’s last duets would be issued.

But Memphis Minnie wasn’t always called Memphis Minnie. Born Lizzie Douglas in northwest Mississippi in 1897, she rejected the name Lizzie in favor of the nickname “Kid,” so “Kid Douglas” she was until a Columbia records talent scout found her and her husband playing in Memphis and sent them to New York to make their first recordings. It was a Columbia producer who renamed them Kansas Joe and Memphis Minnie.

After that 1929 Columbia session, the duo cut their first record for Vocalion on February 20, 1930 and, to celebrate, they got married that very day. Minnie stayed with Vocalion through 1939 but, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, many of her records were also pressed on the Conqueror label, exclusively sold by the Sears Roebuck & Co.

Minnie was a very talented finger-picker on her guitar--one of the best in fact--and her voice was compelling. Her records sales were high, making her one of the best-selling blues artists of the era. Lester Melrose, ex-music publisher turned talent scout, managed Minnie and most of the other major blues artists for the majority of record labels from the mid-1930s through to the late 1940s. During this time, Minnie had some of her biggest hits. She and her second husband, Son Joe, entered the Chicago studio in the spring of 1941 to cut nine songs for the Okeh label, including “Me and My Chauffeur Blues.” It would become an instant hit.

Blues singer Koko Taylor once said “Me and My Chauffeur Blues” was the first blues record she ever heard. “Billboard,” in their typical flamboyant style, reported at the time, “In the race

register, the blues singing of Memphis Minnie always makes for coin machine magic at the Harlem spot.” Poet, activist and journalist Frank Marshall Davis, who held forth with erudition on a wide range of topics, wrote about Minnie in his “Philadelphia Tribune” column: “Memphis Minnie, who sings mean blues, gets her thumping rhythm going on the Okeh recording of ‘Me and My Chauffeur Blues.’”

“Me and My Chauffeur Blues” was so memorable that, 11 years later, Phil and Leonard Chess issued a remake of it on their Checker label. It was so popular that Lightnin’ Hopkins did an “answer song” about it titled “Automobile Blues.”

Seven months after “Me and My Chauffeur Blues,” Minnie and Son Joe returned to the studio and turned out a two-sided hit, “Looking the World Over” backed with “Black Rat Swing.” But they got stopped in their tracks by James Petrillo, president of the American Federation of Musicians, who, seeking a higher rate of royalties for musicians, called for a recording strike on August 1, 1942. The strike didn’t end until 1944. And by the time World War II drew to a close a year later, blues recording had undergone various seismic changes. Minnie’s last recording session for a major label--Columbia--took place in 1949. By that time, smaller record companies like Chess, King and Savoy had begun recording singers like Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf. Now these labels were the ones making the hits and filling the clubs and taverns. The Melrose sound had become obsolete.

Though making records was one source of income for Minnie, her main source was personal appearances. In her pre-Chicago years, she could make \$50 to \$100 a week, playing for parties, picnics and fish-fries. When she moved to the North, gigging in the clubs and bars on Chicago’s South and West Side became her focus. When she was in town, she was usually at the 708 Club on 47th Street, but she frequently played at Joe’s Rendezvous Lounge, Martin’s Corner or on stage at the Indiana Theatre’s midnight show. Many of her colleagues remember her great Blue Monday parties at Ruby Lee Gatewood’s on Lake Street. Minnie even played at the Blue Note, a jazz club in the Chicago Loop, and she was a guest on Studs Terkel’s famous radio program. Often, Minnie spent months on the road-- gigging in small towns in Mississippi and Louisiana, as well as in large cities like Indianapolis and Detroit.

By the end of the 1950s, however, with her health in decline, Memphis Minnie returned to her namesake city and performed only occasionally. She suffered a stroke in 1960 and a second not long after. Eventually, she was confined to a wheelchair. She spent her later years living off Social Security and, often, donations from fans. She died in 1973.

Yet, even in relative obscurity, her influence was felt. Years after her release, Jefferson Airplane did their own version of “Me and My Chauffeur” in the 1960s. When the Blues Hall of Fame was created, Minnie was one of the first singers to be admitted. Some of the Blues singers who were influenced by Minnie include B.B. King, Tampa Red, Big Bill Broonzy, Johnny Shines, Eddie Boyd, J.B. Lenoir and Billy Boy Arnold, to name only a few. As bluesman Bukka White put it, “She was the best thing going in the woman line.”

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.