

“Minnie the Moocher”--Cab Calloway (1931)

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Essay by Herb Boyd (guest post)*



Cab Calloway

Cab Calloway was one of the most magnetic, energetic entertainers in the history of American culture. He was a bandleader whose vocalizations, including scat-singing and jive talking, propelled his jazz ensemble to worldwide acclaim. Key to his celebrity was his rendition of “Minnie the Moocher,” the first of a long-running series of hits, with a debut recording in 1931.

At the time of the recording Calloway and his band had recently replaced the Duke Ellington Orchestra at the Cotton Club in Harlem. Even before he recorded “Minnie the Moocher,” scat singing and call-and-response were part of many jazz groups’ repertoire. But Calloway, with his dynamic stage presence, perfect diction, and linguistic versatility, took the style to another level of popularity. And with his composition, “Minnie the Moocher,” with its sexual innuendoes, references to cocaine and other drugs, and being about a bawdy woman of the night, was like an anthem to low-life communities. And Harlem was probably the location he had in mind.

Whether the record buyers understood the lyrics with such lines as “kicking the gong around” is questionable. It was Calloway’s slow deliberate but effective storytelling that was most alluring, and that appeal reached a cross-section of music lovers. From the opening lines of the song, Calloway draws the listener in: *“Folks, now here’s the story ’bout Minnie the Moocher / She was a red-hot hootchie-cootcher / She was the roughest, toughest frail / But Minnie had a heart as big as a whale.”*

Then came Calloway’s signature scat, delivered in a rapid call-and-response style: *“Hi-de-hi-de-hi-di-hi! Ho-de-ho-de-ho-de-ho! He-de-he-de-he-de-he!”*

There’s a scene in “Porgy and Bess,” where Calloway, as Sportin’ Life, sings “It Ain’t Necessarily So” with all the pizzazz and hoodoo he exuded on “Minnie the Moocher.” It was

rumored that the Gershwins, the creators of the show, based the character on Calloway, and, if so, then it was a perfect fit.

No performance by Calloway and his band was complete without “Minnie the Moocher,” and the audience participation through the call-and-response at club dates and dances gave the song additional resonance.

The recording sold more than a million copies and was instrumental in providing Calloway with additional exposure via films and animated cartoons.

His wide-mouth smile, zoot suits, and kinetic movements, made him an easy image to capture on film, both in real time in front of his band or caricatured via animation. In 1932, there was a mixed film and animated version of “Minnie the Moocher” created by Max Fleischer, the creator of Popeye the Sailor, that opened with Calloway actually doing his rubber-man dance with moonwalk gestures before it morphs into the Betty Boop cartoon. In the animated portion of the film, Calloway’s voice is heard but it’s delivered by a cartoonish walrus. Calloway and Betty Boop would appear again in Fleischer’s “The Old Man of the Mountain” in 1933. Fleischer, along with his two brothers, was able to replicate Calloway’s supple movements utilizing the Rotoscope, Fleischer’s invention, to project the film of Calloway on an easel and then trace his movements frame by frame.

Legends abound as to the origins of “Minnie the Moocher.” Some musicologists say it was based on “Willie the Weeper,” a 1927 version of an earlier vaudeville number by Frankie “Half-Pint” Jaxson. But according to an article published in “Jet” magazine in 1951, there was a real Minnie who had just died and “was a familiar figure in downtown Indianapolis.” Her real name was Minnie Gayton and she allegedly acquired the nickname “Moocher” by regularly begging for food and then eating it from a baby buggy. “During the record-breaking blizzard her body was found on a porch, blanketed with snow. She died from exposure,” according to “Jet” magazine, November 22, 1951.

In his autobiography, “Of Minnie the Moocher & Me,” with Bryant Rollins, there is no mention of Minnie Gayton and, moreover, she would have been in her 60s when the song was recorded and very unlikely to have been known to Calloway.

Calloway had several other iterations of the song and “Minnie” was included in at least a half dozen other recordings, including those by other performers. In fact, some 50 years after Calloway’s recording, famed saxophonist Illinois Jacquet, once a member of Calloway’s band, was still entertaining audiences with his take on the shady lady.

When “The Blues Brothers” film hit the screens in 1980, Calloway performed “Minnie the Moocher” both with his orchestra and as a stand-in. Even so, another lady of far more reputable standing, Aretha Franklin, overshadowed “Minnie” with her rousing “Think.”

“Minnie the Moocher” was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1999, five years after Calloway’s death at age 86. Among his numerous awards was the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 2008.

In many respects, Calloway, born Cabell Calloway III on Christmas Day in 1907 in Rochester, New York, was an American original, endowed with unique musical talent, expressive dance ability, and a gift of palaver. He was a matchless bandleader when it came to engaging an audience, often inviting them to join him in a call-and-response routine that became increasingly difficult for them to follow after he introduced his scatting and nonsense syllables. This ability, along with his rubber-like movements, sometimes with a baton in his hands, and a zoot suit flapping in time with the music, gave him an irresistible appeal. Later his gift of gab would be compiled in “Cab Calloway’s Hepster’s Dictionary: A Guide to the Language of Jive” (1938), a primer of the slang used mainly by musicians.

We close with the final verse and chorus of “Minnie the Moocher,” though it remains unclear exactly what happened to her: *“He [the King of Sweden] gave her his town house and his racing horses / Each meal she ate was a dozen courses / She had a million dollars’ worth of nickels and dimes / She sat around and counted them all a million times / Hi de hi de hi de hi, Ho de ho de ho de ho, Hee de hee de hee de hee, Hi de hi de hi de ho / Poor min, Poor Min, Poor Min.”*

Herb Boyd is author, journalist and an adjunct professor at City College in New York. He has written or edited 28 books; “Black Detroit--A People's History of Self-Determination” is his most recent.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.