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**DETROIT BLUES WOMEN**

by

**MICHAEL DUGGAN MURPHY**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

2011

MAJOR: HISTORY

Approved by:

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Advisor

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Date

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## **DEDICATION**

“Detroit Blues Women” is dedicated to all the women in Detroit who have kept the blues alive, to the many friends, teachers and musicians who have inspired me throughout my life, and especially to the wonderful and amazing family that has kept me alive. Many thanks to Lee, Frank, Tom, Terry, Kim, Allison, Brendan, John, Dianne, Frankie, Tommy, Kathy, Joe, Molly, Tom, Ann, Michael, Dennis, Nancy, Mary, Gerry, Charles, Noranne, Eugene, Maegan, Rebecca, Tim, Debby, Michael Dermot and Angela.

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As I worked my way through graduate school, other educators and fellow students aided me in ways both tangible and intangible. Albert Agosti and Christopher Johnson are first among those educators. Both of them fostered my interest in academic work and offered thoughtful guidance and direction as I pursued graduate studies. Ken Garner, an extraordinarily intelligent student and teacher has been a good friend ever since we shared intro history courses at Schoolcraft Community College a long, long time ago. I would also like to express my gratitude to several other fellow students who have left indelible impressions on me. These include Joseph Turrini, Richard Fry, Kathryn Beard, Barry Johnson, Goulin Yi, Louis Jones, Timothy O’Neil, David Smith, Glen Styles, Glen Bessemer, and Three Irish Tims named O’Neil, Dwyer and Moran.

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## Introduction

“Detroit Blues Women” explores how African American women’s blues survived the twentieth century relatively unscripted by the image-makers of the music industry. Forged in the 1920s, women’s blues carried over into the twenty-first century in spite of the abandonment of the genre in the late 1920s by the country’s major recording labels. Many blues women succeeded in ensuing years despite having to struggle for recognition within a musical field dominated by men –musicians, writers and chroniclers, spectators and business people--who attempted to marginalize or trivialize their work and the work of their 1920s predecessors. While the broad topics of sexuality and gender relations dominate blues music sung by women, they are not the totality of women’s blues, which also embrace a broad range of socio-economic topics.

Embellished, revamped, and reinterpreted in the decades that have come and gone since the 1920s, “women’s blues,” which is defined partially as music that harbors and promotes the core notions of individual and collective freedom, has historically provided black women with a space where self-expression is permissible and wherein black culture can be conveyed. Within this musical genre, black women blues singers have claimed independence and a self-directed sexuality that asserts female desires in place of an objectified male-imposed sexuality. In doing so, many of the blues women have shown resistance to some the prescriptive race-, class-, and gender-based notions of “what a [working-class black] woman ought to be and do” that arose in black and white communities and were put forth by men and by women.”<sup>1</sup>

This study also seeks to discount notions that the blues queens of the 1920s, or of any era, were, to a large degree, the creation of the music industry, “a product of commercialization,” or

novelty items, as is implied by some male blues scholars, such as Paul Oliver and William Barlow.<sup>2</sup> They instead developed out of the African American vernacular and musical sources; the most prominent being blues music itself. Although the origins of the blues are uncertain, the music appears to have been a late nineteenth century African America invention that built upon many elements of then popular African American folk music, such as field hollers, work songs, spirituals, ballads, griot songs, and even the “coon songs” of minstrelsy, performed by both men and women. Lyrically, the blues portrayed many aspects of working-class African American life, including love, labor, and loss, and resisted and rebelled against some of the external forces that affected African Americans in the United States, such as race, gender and class oppression.

Embodied in much of the blues music was also a yearning from freedom and liberation, which for poor black women required finding relief from the multiple pressures of race, class and gender oppression. One of the first opportunities for working-class African American women to achieve upward mobility and to construct an arena in which their protests and concerns were audible presented itself in the 1920s in the field of entertainment and through the predominantly “white” world of commerce. While the music industry in that era was indeed racist, sexist, exploitative and limiting, and in many senses did “make” the 1920s blues women, “Detroit Blues Women” argues that those African American working-class women, and the black working-class Americans who initially supported them, had a great impact on the music industry. Through their writing and performances, working-class African American women helped shape consumer preferences. Working-class African American audiences, in turn, helped shape the compositions and performances of the blues women and the conduct of the record companies, which in some cases altered rosters and production and marketing strategies to capture an increasingly substantial African American market for blues music. As the decade progressed, the black



working class called for a genuine southern sounds and performers, and the 1920s music industry acclimated itself to this demand. While initially read from a somewhat disingenuous script, wherein white women and light-skinned black women--mostly northern girls--who sang Tin Pan Alley's "northernized" blues, a southern women's blues that was closer to blues born in its ancestral habitat, yet was still recorded and produced in the urban north, attained popularity in the early 1920s.

The story of African American women's blues in the twentieth century relates to two migrations. The first was the real and physical event known as the Great Migration that brought about a tremendous northward migration of southern blacks and essentially gave birth to the blues women phenomenon. In many cases, blues women of the 1920s, especially those working-class southerners who moved north during the peak years of the Great Migration, participated in and documented the relocation of African Americans from the South to the North that occurred primarily between 1910 and 1930. Many of the blues women who wrote songs for themselves, and for others, helped provide the Great Migration with a working-class perspective. Their perspective was often more realistic and honest than the one offered by the white, and black, propagandists of both the North and the South who sometimes sugarcoated the realities of the Great Migration in their attempts to either spark or curb the exodus. Embedded in the Great Migration was the journey of blues music and blues musicians to burgeoning northern recording centers such as Chicago and New York. Northern industrial climes transformed southern blues, but not entirely. An urban sounding music made in the North maintained some of the cultural sensibilities of the South. To the migrants who came north from both the rural and the urban South, blues music served as link back to the South and an introduction to the new, unfamiliar urban North. With one foot in tradition and one foot in modernity, the blues looked both

backward and forward. According to African American women's historian Tera W. Hunter, "the blues . . . bore signs of historical consciousness . . . reflected changes in black life [and] informed, and reflected broader African American working-class self-understandings in the modern world."<sup>3</sup> "Detroit Blues Women's" first chapter is devoted to some of the 1920s blues queens who migrated to northern cities such as Chicago and Detroit and helped incorporate an African American, working-class women's blues into popular culture.

The second migration undertaken by the performers of woman's blues was an aesthetic, spiritual, and transcendent journey that transported African American women and their music across barriers of race, class, and gender, as well as across musical divides and categorizations. In the three decades following the 1920s, different instrumentation, different blues stylizations, and different historical contexts altered women's blues yet left its core elements (its yearning for freedom and liberation, its allowance for a female subjectivity and sexuality free from the conventions of patriarchy and its room for self-assertion) intact. "Detroit Blues Women" focuses in its second chapter on the first few decades of the seventy-years-and-counting career of Detroit Queen of the Blues, Alberta Adams. Adams, who began performing in the late 1930s in the black-and-tan nightclubs of Paradise Valley, the city's black entertainment and commercial center, is old enough to recall Detroit performances of 1920s blues queens like Bessie Smith, who she took as an early inspiration. With her assertiveness, her independence, her individuality, her wicked humor and her sparks of rebellion, Adams has expounded, and expanded upon, the legacy of the original blues queens, and she continues to do so.

Chapter three argues that the sexual repression and patriarchal control that prevailed at Motown in the early 1960s, along with the growing disinterest among young African Americans in the blues, demonstrated by Motown president Berry Gordy, Jr. and vice-president William

“Smokey” Robinson, helped to decrease opportunities for blues women in Detroit during Motown’s heyday. The chapter ultimately reveals that a few rebellious female artists at the label continued in the blues woman tradition of assertiveness and resistance despite top-down attempts to control them. Chapter four, which focuses on four modern Detroit blues women and shows that with their assertive sexualities, their independent mindsets and their self-affirming attitudes, the singers retained many of the traits attributed to the 1920s blues women.

Chapter five describes the impact of two white musician/entrepreneurs on women’s blues in Detroit, and deals with issues of race and authenticity within blues music. Chapter six expands on those themes and focuses once again on the career of Alberta Adams, which, by the 1990s, had changed dramatically. Managed by a white man, playing with white musicians, and performing to white audiences, Adams and her career reflected the changes in the blues that occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century. In the 1960s, the British invasion and the 1960s folk and blues revivals combined to expose blues music a young white audience and to bless blues music with unprecedented commercial success. By the 1990s, Adams neared the apex of her career, and changes in the music industry allowed her to release compact discs and play to large festival audiences across the United States and Canada. However, her continuing tendency to equate the blues with freedom and her maintenance of an assertive sexuality refashioned for an elder performer reaffirmed her connection to the original blues queens.

Scholars of the blues often emphasize that, with the exception of the 1920s blues queens, the blues has been predominantly masculine territory in terms of its audiences and its performers. Moreover, masculinity has become synonymous with authenticity in the blues and it is this heavily gendered perception of blues music that sometimes suppresses or obfuscates the many feminine perspectives that women have woven into the long history of blues music. Few male

blues scholars have taken up the case of these women's perspectives in the blues genre, especially beyond the lives and legacies of the 1920s blues queens. Female blues scholars, like Daphne Duvall Harrison, Angela Y. Davis, Hazel V. Carby, Sandra Leib and Marybeth Hamilton, have begun in recent decades to examine and assess both the concept of women's blues and the role of blues women in African American society and in the United States.<sup>4</sup> The notion of "women's blues" remains controversial, even among some of the women interviewed for this study. Apart from the women's blues written and performed by blues women, some songs written by men and reinterpreted by women transformed into women's blues. Otis Redding's "Respect" in the hands of Aretha Franklin, and Bo Diddley's "I'm a Man" as "I'm a Woman," in the hands of Koko Taylor, demonstrate that gender distinctions generally add a different meaning to a "male" song that is sung from a female perspective. "Respect" by Franklin, whose 1967 version far surpassed Redding's in popularity, was adopted as an anthem by the Black Power Movement and the Feminist Movement.<sup>5</sup> In Redding's version, "Respect" is apparently about a man who demands respect from a woman and offers labor, commitment, money, and just about all he has in return, but it can also be seen as a tale of a black man demanding respect from a white man's America. Franklin's version, from the perspective of a black woman, adds an additional dimension to the song and reveals an additional layer of oppression. While black women who worked outside the home were neither an anomaly nor a new phenomenon in 1967, Franklin, by using the words of a man to represent a woman, still manages to subvert patriarchal notions of a woman's "proper" place in the 1960s. In Franklin's hands, the song elucidates more levels of oppression, but it also sees brings to light additional avenues of resistance. Franklin's "Respect," which she transforms into a woman's blues, does much to describe the peculiar situation of black working-class women in the United States.

Carby declares that black women's "exercise of power and control over sexuality was short lived," and restricted to the blues queens of the 1920s.<sup>6</sup> A major argument embedded in "Detroit Blues Women" holds that women's power and control over defining their own sexuality through the medium of blues music did not die out following that brief period in which women's blues stood near the forefront of African American popular entertainment. At least within the realm of blues music, black women have continued to formulate and portray a more inner-directed sexuality that both challenges and resists patriarchal, racist and class assumptions regarding a black woman's place. Seen in the larger context of African American history, the blues women-- a very small minority among the masses of African American women, but a minority that had the potential to reach larger numbers of women--complicate notions of invisibility that some historians use to describe the peculiar situation of working-class black women in the twentieth century. Their mere existence and their sometimes-lofty status within working-class black communities also challenges perceptions that only intellectual and bourgeois black men and black women became race leaders. Bessie Smith, the daughter of a laborer and part-time Baptist preacher, "more than any other women of her time," came to symbolize the resurgent militancy and racial pride of African Americans embodied in the New Negro Movement, according to the editors of *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*.<sup>7</sup>

The 1920s blues women played an important role in the African American working-class communities of both the North and the South by serving as "cultural conservators" and "cultural innovators." These women provided working-class African Americans with important connections to the past and suggested ways to better navigate the pitfalls of an often-chaotic present and an extraordinarily indeterminate future during a traumatic and crucial period of African American history. Their heirs continued to fulfill that function after the migration

subsided.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, black blues women showed other women that assertiveness, independence, and liberation were within their grasp. Through the recording, promotion and performance of their songs, many of the women became “queens”, “empresses”, and something akin to religious leaders for their African American audiences. They “preached” the blues with lyrics that sometimes simultaneously represented the highs and lows experienced by an individual and the tragedies and triumphs that have affected the African American people. In so doing, blues women have also played a major role in shaping and developing blues music, an African American working class invention that has done much to create the unique musical culture of the United States, a musical culture that has had a tremendous impact on music worldwide.

I would also like to include in this introduction my reasons for focusing on the blues women of Detroit and naming this dissertation “Detroit Blues Women” instead of writing on blues women nationwide or the blues women who have made their homes and careers in American cities other than Detroit.” As a matter of disclosure, I should first say that I was born and raised in Detroit and its suburbs and that I enrolled in a PhD program at Wayne State University, which is located in the center of Detroit. I have also been a fan of Detroit music since, as a child, I first heard Motown music on the streets of Detroit, and Motown truly did invade the very atmosphere of the city in the 1960s. Since then, my interest in the music of Detroit has drawn upon some of the best the city has had to offer in rock and roll, punk, rhythm and blues, garage, blues, country, jazz, soul and funk. I have discovered (and continue to discover) parts of a musical legacy that runs much deeper and broader than I could have ever imagined. Thus, while those who name the “music cities” of the world might overlook Detroit, many Detroiters (and many non-Detroiters for that matter) have long been aware that the city’s

unique and rich musical culture is perhaps, as Thornetta Davis (one of the modern blues women who makes a substantial appearance in chapter four) puts it, Detroit's "gem."

While often overshadowed by other musical genres that have arrived in its wake, blues music set the trend in popular music that has characterized the city of Detroit. It also stands as the foundation and inspiration for many of the musical genres that have eventually outrun the blues in terms of popular appeal. While Detroit may not have a roster of blues artists as renowned as Chicago's, there has been a blues scene of some sort or another in the city ever since the 1920s. For every John Lee Hooker, there have been dozens of equally talented blues artists--male *and* female--who have gone relatively unnoticed outside of the city of Detroit. "Detroit Blues Women" demonstrates that in Detroit 1920s blues queens like Bessie Smith and Sippie Wallace passed the tradition of women's blues on to jazz-influenced singers like Alberta Adams. Partially because of her longevity in show business, Adams was able to pass the torch to modern day Detroit female blues artists like Thornetta Davis, Lady T, Cathy Davis, and Cee Cee Collins, many of whom have been inspired by 1960s Motown and Aretha Franklin. Since the 1920s, the tradition of women's blues has remained strong in Detroit because Detroiters have chosen to make music an integral part of the city's culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Marybeth Hamilton, "Sexuality, Authenticity, and the Making of the Blues Tradition," *Past & Present*, no. 169 (November 2000): 133-134.

<sup>3</sup> Tera w. Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 169.

<sup>4</sup> Hazel V. Carby, *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* (London: Verso, 1999); Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993); Sandra R. Leib, *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey* (Boston: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1981); Marybeth Hamilton, "Sexuality:" 132-160.

<sup>5</sup> Craig Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 116.

<sup>6</sup> Carby, *Cultures in Babylon*, 20.

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<sup>7</sup> Brown, Elsa Barkley, Darlene Clark Hine, Rosalyn Torberg Penn, eds., *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1993), 1074.

<sup>8</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).



## Chapter One

## The Blues Queens, Sippie Wallace, and the Emergence of the Blues in Detroit

Since the 1920s, when black women singers like Beulah “Sippie” Wallace, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, and Bessie Smith rose to prominence and became what Daphne Duval Harrison has defined as “blues queens,” black women have helped shape the course of American popular music.<sup>9</sup> The blues queens, or blues women, of the 1920s also established a women’s voice in popular culture that sometimes equaled or surpassed that of preachers in the male-dominated church.<sup>10</sup> Although the national spotlight illuminated the blues queens for only a brief decade, the blues women still serve as antecedents and inspiration to twenty-first-century musicians through their recorded work and in the place they have earned in the literature of the blues.

Beulah “Sippie” Wallace, like many other black female singers, was heir to the success of “Crazy Blues,” a blues song performed by Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds in 1920. By 1923, American commerce discovered Bessie Smith, Sippie Wallace, and Ma Rainey, who claimed the title “The Mother of the Blues.” These three singers, among many others, contributed what blues commentators would later describe as a more authentic, southern flavor to the race records market in 1923. All three had included blues songs in their performances for years. Rainey had gone so far as to make the claim that she had invented the blues after she heard a lonesome girl moaning a blues song in 1902 and incorporated it into her traveling tent show.<sup>11</sup> While it is difficult to determine when the blues first surfaced, or who first performed the music, Ma Rainey was likely among the first professional female musicians to perform blues-influenced songs, a practice she began in 1902.<sup>12</sup>

Black cultural critic Hazel V. Carby contends that the blues established a sexual subjectivity for African-American working-class women, wherein they became sexual subjects driven by their own desires instead of as sexual objects, and that blues music helped to equip black women with a politicized, feminist voice.<sup>13</sup> The blues women developed a rebellious women's blues that resisted oppression related to race, class, and gender and simultaneously affirmed the self-reliance and assertiveness of working-class women in the black community. Blues written and performed by black men addressed race and class and gender issues, too, and was a form of resistance. However, women's blues revealed a three-tiered oppression particular to working-class black women and afforded some of those women an opportunity to assert and express a female subjectivity and sexuality rarely seen prior to the 1920s, the decade of a so-called sexual revolution.<sup>14</sup> Blues women of the 1920s reclaimed a black female sexuality and claimed a subjectivity that allowed them what African American historian Evelyn Hammonds describes as the power "to name [themselves] rather than be named."<sup>15</sup> The blues women challenged the patriarchal conceptions of a "woman's place" in black, working-class society, and black bourgeois ideals of what was and was not legitimate African American culture.<sup>16</sup> As well, many aspects of spiritual music such as biblical references and yearning for freedom from all types of oppression found their way into secular blues forms.<sup>17</sup> According to historian Angela Y. Davis, songs depicting love and sexuality by women often cloaked yearnings for social liberation.<sup>18</sup> Determining whether the women's blues that both Davis and Carby speak of existed beyond the 1920s among blues women is one of the questions posed within this work.

The origin of the blues is controversial, owing in part to the music's emergence from an oral tradition that for reasons specific to Africa and America remained largely undocumented until the twentieth century. Many blues scholars have speculated that the blues as a specific and

somewhat fixed musical form emerged from the first generation of African Americans born after Emancipation, amidst the failed project of Reconstruction and with the emergence of the Jim Crow South.<sup>19</sup> Other authors will name the many component parts of the blues but stop short before identifying a time and place where the blues began.<sup>20</sup> Robert Palmer lists the traditional parts of the blues as one-verse jump-ups played by brass bands, minstrel shows, field hollers or work songs, songster ballads, church music and African-derived percussive music.<sup>21</sup> Stating that the “how,” “when,” “why,” and the “who” of the blues are not yet known, Luc Sante makes the claim that the blues is “one of the early manifestations of modernity.” Sante theorizes that someone near the end of the nineteenth-century was able to put all the existent parts of the blues together and make something new that represented a break with the past, similar to inventions such as the automobile, the movies, radio transmission and cylinder recordings.<sup>22</sup>

W. C. Handy, known as the “father of the blues,” attributes many “found” songs to his own authorship. He actually may have done more transcribing and annotating than creating.<sup>23</sup> Near the turn of the century, Handy was about to doze off at a train station in Tutwiler, Mississippi, when he heard a southern African American man play the blues. The experience transformed Handy. “That night,” he wrote in his autobiography, “a composer was born, an American composer.” Handy, an aspiring music businessman as well as a composer and a musician, struggled to find a publisher for his blues adaptations until 1912, when he paid to have “The Memphis Blues” published.<sup>24</sup> Another origins story emerges in Jelly Roll Morton’s 1938 tale of Mamie Desdoumes, a pianist, singer and sometimes prostitute who lived in Storyville, the legal red light district that operated in New Orleans. Morton, born in 1885, said the event occurred in his childhood, making it likely that he heard Desdoumes’s blues sometime before the turn of the century. Trumpeter Bunk Johnson also remembered Desdoumes as a blues singer.

One theory surrounding this tale has it that the blues could have originated in New Orleans, and “went feral in the countryside,” where it was later discovered by professionals like Handy and Rainey as rural folk music.<sup>25</sup>

The commercialization of the blues may have been one of the first instances of white men promoting and distributing a specifically African American product on a massive scale. Commercialization occurred after many migrations, many fusions, and many interactions between “black” and “white,” “man” and “woman,” and “human” and “machine” had altered the music. Initially influenced and embellished by jazz, vaudeville bands, brass bands, record companies, and even vaudeville’s white songstresses of the teens, what became known as the “classic” or “vaudeville” blues began with the 1920 release of “Crazy Blues” by Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds on Okeh Records. What was new about “Crazy Blues” was that it was a blues song sung by an African American woman that the record company intended to sell to an African American audience. “She made it possible for us all,” said fellow blues queen Alberta Hunter of Mamie Smith, a native of Cincinnati.<sup>26</sup> African American blues women proceeded to dominate the race market for the bulk of the decade.<sup>27</sup> A mere handful of record companies recorded over two-hundred blues women before 1930.<sup>28</sup> As the 1920s progressed, the record companies proved very willing to pay attention to the African American market as long as profits increased.

“Crazy Blues,” performed by Smith and her band and written by Tin Pan Alley songwriter and publisher Perry Bradford – all African Americans – quickly struck gold in what became the “race” market, that is, the emergent African American market for songs performed by blacks. It took a lot of convincing on Bradford’s part to get Okeh Records to put out a record with songs sung by an African American woman, but the record company did not exactly take a

shot in the dark. Fred W. Hager, the white manager of Okeh Records' parent company, the General Phonograph Company, agreed to record and manufacture "Crazy Blues." For that, Bradford praises Hager in his autobiography. However, indications are that an African American market for phonograph records featuring African American artists had emerged by 1920.<sup>29</sup> The Victor Talking Machine Company already had broken the race barrier in 1913 by signing Jim Europe, the African American musician and orchestra leader largely responsible for the foxtrot ballroom dancing craze. White women had found success in singing the blues by adapting blues songs written by black songwriters like Handy and Bradford. As early as 1915, "*The Chicago Defender* reported that 'the record companies' were interested in knowing how many phonographs were owned by 'members of the Race.'"<sup>30</sup> Also in 1915, Handy succeeded in getting white recording artists to record his compositions, but until "Crazy Blues" was released in 1920, the white record companies refused to embrace the blues as sung by African Americans.<sup>31</sup>

Getting an African American to sing "Crazy Blues" was the culmination of several actions and events that occurred in the several years immediately preceding 1920. In her praise of Mamie Smith, Alberta Hunter, a Chicago cabaret singer from Memphis, who since 1917 had been performing the work of W.C. Handy, had reduced the many actors involved in launching "Crazy Blues" to one. Bradford, born in 1895, was a tireless promoter of the blues. His mother cooked for prisoners at Atlanta's Fulton Street Jail at the turn of the century. Perry thus had a window that revealed one of the worlds that nurtured the blues, believed by some to be rooted in the work songs of the South and "carried" by ex-prisoners, migrant workers, casual laborers, and hoboes.<sup>32</sup> White vaudeville artists like Marion Harris, who reputedly sang as if she were black and was the first to be billed as "Queen of the Blues," as well as ethnic impersonators like Norah

Bayes and Marie Cahill, who recorded Handy's blues composition, "The Dallas Blues," began playing Handy's blues compositions around 1915.<sup>33</sup> Jewish American stage star Sophie Tucker started performing Handy's blues songs in 1917 after hearing them performed by African American artists like Hunter. The blues, which had existed for at least two decades in the South, seeped slowly into the northern consciousness, a process that accelerated with the increase of migrants heading from the South to the North. Prior to 1920, both black and white vaudeville performers as well as African American women who toured the South, like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Sippie Wallace, sang blues numbers, but the record companies only recorded white women singing blues.

White America became acquainted with blues in the World War I decade as blues songs worked their way into the repertoires of the parade bands and sideshow annex bands and into vaudeville.<sup>34</sup> According to Thomas L. Morgan and William Barlow, the emergence of the three genres of secular music associated primarily with African Americans—blues, ragtime and jazz—“coincided with the invention of the phonograph, the rise of Tin Pan Alley, and the organization of a black vaudeville circuit, all of which served to popularize the music with white audiences.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, for the first two decades of the twentieth century, white record companies ignored African American music as performed by African Americans, with few exceptions.<sup>36</sup> For years, Bradford emphatically claimed, “14 million negroes will buy records if recorded by one of their own.”<sup>37</sup> The question is not why 1920, but why did the recording companies wait until 1920. Racism, class bias, and the false conviction that blacks would not buy phonograph records, all prejudices ingrained in the fledgling industry, may have prevented the labels from tapping the burgeoning African-American market.<sup>38</sup>

By the time OKeh released “Crazy Blues,” a booking network for black artists operated by the Theater Owners Booking Agency (TOBA) had become entrenched in African-American communities in the North and the South. Italian-American Anselmo Barrasso founded TOBA in 1909, but African Americans later came to own a stake in the booking agency, which catered to black vaudeville theaters. The establishment of TOBA (also called “Tough on Black Asses”) coincided with an increase in venues receptive to black performers and audiences.<sup>39</sup> In 1905, the Pekin Theater in Chicago became the first major black-run theater in the North. In 1909, Maria C. Downs, a Puerto Rican woman, purchased a nickelodeon in Harlem and transformed it into the 800-seat Lincoln Theater, which booked African-American talent almost exclusively. The female entrepreneur expanded the Lincoln’s capacity to 1500 seats by 1915. By 1921, blacks owned and managed 94 out of the 300 theaters in the country catering to African Americans.<sup>40</sup> Based on TOBA’s success, there was clearly an African American market for black vaudeville. TOBA’s success, along with other factors, such as increasing black ownership of phonographs and the increased presence of African Americans in the North, may also have had an impact on OKeh’s release of “Crazy Blues.”

The assistance OKeh Records received from *The Chicago Defender* in terms of providing editorial comment on the success of “Crazy Blues,” selling OKeh advertising space and giving OKeh access to much of the African-American market via the reach of the widely distributed newspaper proved a godsend to the record company as well as the many African-Americans involved with “Crazy Blues.” It seemed odd, though, that an institution representative of the Talented Tenth would lower itself to promote music developed by the Submerged Tenth, and which *Defender* editor Robert S. Abbot viewed as being unfit for consumption. Abbot, whose own musical tastes dwelled in European classical music, described blues and jazz--both very

similar at the time--as brutish, initially sneering at the relatively new musical genres.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the influential African American newspaper equated the *purchase* of “Crazy Blues” with advancing the Race. The editor told readers to buy the record “because a white record company stuck its neck out,” despite harboring doubts that blues music held any value for African Americans of any class. Appalled by the blues phenomenon and determined to set readers against it, an editorial writer working for *The Detroit Contender* furnished another sign of middle-class reaction to blues music. Calling blues singers “apostles of tough luck” and demanding “songs of hope,” the writer sounded a stern warning: “such rot only poisons the soul and dwarfs the intellect.”<sup>42</sup> Representatives of the black middle-class voiced displeasure with the content of the recorded products, but admired the achievement that sales figures for the records represented in terms of advancing the Race. The blues did and did not attain middle-class respectability, but the success of the music enhanced racial pride.

The black newspapers were ultimately overcome not only by the sheer popularity of the music among their readers, but by cultural mediators such as writer and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston, and poets Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes, whose *The Weary Blues*, published in 1926, not only paid tribute to blues artists but incorporated the structural blues forms into poetry. The poets and writers lent credence to interpreting the blues as an African American art form, a lofty categorization that may have baffled some members of the black working class.<sup>43</sup> Much earlier, writers in *The Defender* began to bubble with enthusiasm, keeping their eye on profit potential and the possibility of integration represented by the blues records: “not only do these discs enjoy wide sales among the Colored Race, but they have caught on with the Caucasians.”<sup>44</sup> *The Defender* beamed when Bessie Smith made her debut performance at Chicago’s Avenue Theater: “So much has been said of Bessie that Chicagoans were looking for something far



above average . . . she gave it.” Bessie had changed gowns backstage several times while Ruby Jones danced, giving the writer another reason to remark.<sup>45</sup> The blues, a working-class form of entertainment, received status uplift from some members of the black middle class.

“Crazy Blues” sold—almost exclusively to blacks--about seventy-thousand copies in the first month after its release and an estimated one-hundred thousand total.<sup>46</sup> Okeh restricted its marketing to African Americans in the northern urban centers, but copies of the record – similar to copies of *The Defender* – reached the South with the help of Pullman porters, who bought the records by the dozens before heading southward.<sup>47</sup> Perry Bradford arrived in Detroit on a Saturday with the traveling company of Schubert’s *Deary Company* following the release of “Crazy Blues” and met with a pleasant surprise. “‘Crazy Blues’ had set the town plum crazy! Colored and white bought Mamie’s records just as fast as the Grinnell music shop could unpack them.” He went to check out his room at a “first-class hotel for colored people,” and he could not believe his eyes. “It was packed with folks listening to Mamie Smith’s records.”<sup>48</sup>

With its roots in the vaudeville tradition, its Tin Pan Alley flavor, and its jazzy musicianship and vocalizing, “Crazy Blues,” like many of the blues records by the 1920s blues women, has been placed outside the realm of authenticity in the blues by post-1950s blues scholars and characterized as “classic blues” or “vaudeville blues.”<sup>49</sup> However, it should be noted that primarily white blues commentators had not yet invented the term “authentic” to apply to the blues in the era of the 1920s blues queens. In more recent decades, the authenticity of “classic blues” has come under fire in relation to its instrumentation, its vocal performances and its lyrical content, but when it was released, “Crazy Blues” was considered authentic blues and a landmark achievement for Perry Bradford, Mamie Smith, the Race woman, and the Race man.<sup>50</sup> As blues historian Paul Oliver writes, “It had meaning not only for the singer but for every

African American who listened to it.”<sup>51</sup> In *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) wrote that, socially, “classic blues” and its jazzy musical accompaniment “represented the Negro’s entrance into the world of professional entertainment.”<sup>52</sup> Baraka makes this statement despite the popularity achieved by African American ragtime music in the 1890s, and the -popularity of black minstrelsy, most famously represented by Bert Williams. Williams became famous on the vaudeville circuit decades before 1915, when he joined Zeigfield Follies, on Broadway.<sup>53</sup> While those musical phenomena make it appear that Baraka’s statement is incorrect, the post-World War One formation of modern mass culture, which saw the popularization of film and tremendous increases in American ownership of radios and phonographs, revolutionized American show business. In effect, post-World War One show business, like modernism, broke with the past, which was in part represented by Ragtime and Minstrelsy.<sup>54</sup>

The question as to why black women rather than black men broke ground first in a musical genre that had more impact on popular music in the twentieth century than any other has multiple answers. Perry Bradford made it clear in his autobiography that it had been a long-held idea of his to have a “colored girl” be first, but he does not explain why. He may have thought that a black woman would be more palatable to the white record company owners.<sup>55</sup> Amiri Baraka explains the prevalence of women’s blues at the time by noting that many blues men at the time stood outside the reach of the northern record companies because they worked as migrants in rural areas. He also notes the prominent musical role women played in the African American church, which translated to a great presence in African American musical theater.<sup>56</sup> Charles Keil speaks of the sex appeal of the women and the overt sexuality present in much of “classic blues.” He speculates that a black man displaying his sexuality to the extent that many

of the blues women did would have been threatening and socially unacceptable to the white businessmen who dominated the recording industry of the 1920s.<sup>57</sup> There are few attempts to disguise female sexuality in “classic blues.”<sup>58</sup> Some blues scholars dismiss the 1920s blues women for their use, or over use, of sexual innuendo, double entendres, and eroticism, all of which prompted historian William Barlow to remark that blues queen performances became a “burlesque of African-American sexuality.” Barlow speculated that record companies used the blues women to titillate their customers.<sup>59</sup> However, it is possible that the burlesque of African American sexuality performed by the blues women merely reflected, or perhaps, like black-on-black minstrelsy, mocked, white racist conceptions of black female sexuality. As George Fredrickson points out in *Black Image in the White Mind*, the 1920s saw resurgence in what he calls “romantic racialism,” wherein qualities whites admirably attributed to blacks like spontaneity, emotionalism, and sensuality, imposed or imagined qualities that were just as racist as inferiority arguments, came to the fore. Black women were “exotic primitives” and whites expected them to act as such.<sup>60</sup>

In 1923, Bessie Smith signed to Columbia Record’s race records division, Ma Rainey signed with Paramount’s race records division, and Sippie Wallace signed to Okeh Records’ race records division. All three hailed from the South and were considered at that time to have greater appeal to black record buyers than vaudeville blues singers like Mamie Smith, many of whom had recently migrated from the South. The “women only” mold broke by mid-decade, when the demand on the part of black record buyers for a different blues sound led to the emergence of male “country blues” stars such as Blind Lemon Jefferson and Blind Blake, both of whom were commercially successful.<sup>61</sup> In turn, the success of these “country blues” artists prompted record companies to scour the South in hopes of discovering untapped “country blues”

as well as white “hillbilly” artists. The record companies proved highly successful in this endeavor, which made 1927 to 1930 peak years in record production. The companies’ diversified attentions, which went beyond “country blues” music, affected the blues women, many of whom were shown the door as early as 1927. After the record labels’ romance with “country blues” commenced, the best of the blues queens sold well, but other blues queens did not fare as well: OKeh dropped Sippie Wallace and Sara Martin in 1927.<sup>62</sup>

The rush by record companies in New York and Chicago to sign African-American female talent indicates a new willingness on the part of white record executives to suspend prejudice and racial exclusion for moneymaking opportunities. It also reveals many of the ways in which the industry had suppressed African-American talent. Baraka claims that the music business was one of the few areas of employment for working-class African American women. Their careers, which generally began very early in life, support his statement. Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, who hailed from Columbus, Georgia, began performing minstrelsy and vaudeville in 1900 at the age of fourteen.<sup>63</sup> Bessie Smith used to “black up” by applying burnt cork to her face just as white minstrels traditionally did and toured the South as an 18-year-old in 1912 after she left her home in Chattanooga, Tennessee.<sup>64</sup> Alberta Hunter left Memphis in 1914 at the age of sixteen and headed to Chicago, where she became a regular featured artist in the cabarets of the Black Metropolis.<sup>65</sup> New Orleans native, Lizzie Miles, Lucille Hegamin from Georgia, Chippie Hill from South Carolina, and Victoria Spivey and Sippie Wallace from Texas joined Hunter in Chicago.<sup>66</sup> Chicago, already renowned as a hot jazz town owing to its status as the destination point of the New Orleans Jazz Diaspora that followed the 1917 closure of Storyville, the fabled New Orleans red light district, became the adopted home of the blues. Some of these women, such as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Sippie Wallace, had been performing blues far longer than

the white vaudeville stars who added blues to their repertoire around 1915. At that time, though, the white record companies were not paying attention, and certainly not paying attention to the South.

Sippie Wallace, like many of the blues queens, was a seasoned performer by the time she arrived in Chicago in 1923.<sup>67</sup> The Houston native's migratory trail and her career path, which led her to Detroit in 1929, provide insight into the rugged life of the blues queens and indicate how complex the Great Migration could be. Her trail twists and turns, and its progressions and reversals, and its tragedies, serve to peel back some of the layers of glamour that obfuscate the lives of the blues queens. In the months preceding the 1929 stock market crash and the ensuing Depression, Victor Records, which picked up Wallace at the beginning of that year, released her from her contract, but she had an impressive career. Sippie recorded 47 songs, mostly for OKeh Records, and a few for Victor Records from 1923 to 1929. Some of the musicians she played with on those recordings – Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet – are also American music luminaries.<sup>68</sup> Wallace, decked out in ostrich feathers, jewelry, and furs, traveled by rail working the TOBA circuit and making \$100 per recording. She composed many of those songs herself. For performing up to five shows a day with her teenage brother and accompanist, Hersal, she brought in \$50 a week. “Life was good – real good,” she said.<sup>69</sup> As a point of comparison, a maid working day shifts at that time in Detroit made about \$2 a day.<sup>70</sup>

Born Beulah Thomas in 1898, the fourth of thirteen children belonging to a Houston Baptist minister and his wife and later nicknamed Sippie because of a gap between her two front teeth that allegedly allowed her to “sip” some of her food, Sippie's introduction to music came via the church.<sup>71</sup> Wallace grew up playing piano and singing at Shiloh Baptist, her father's church. Neither of her parents had a fondness for popular music, and they warned their children

away from it.<sup>72</sup> Her parents' warnings had little effect on Sippie and some of her siblings, most notably her older brother George, a pianist, songwriter, and later a music publisher, who coached Sippie in songwriting. At the age of fifteen, Sippie had already obtained some show business experience singing the blues, which she first heard as a child from the mouth of Ma Rainey. When George decided to embark on a professional music career in New Orleans, fifteen-year-old Sippie went with him. In New Orleans, she soon met and married her first husband, Frank Seals. Her break-up with Seals shortly thereafter may have prompted her to co write, "Adam and Eve Had the Blues," with her brother George. Mixing the sacred and the secular in the blues is common, but Sippie, who grew up playing both, was very comfortable with the blend:

*Eve called her husband and got close to her spouse  
 She said, 'Here's some fruit, eat it, it will make us fine'  
 She said, 'Eat some fruit, the good lord is gone'  
 Adam said, 'Yeah, it won't take long'<sup>73</sup>*

It was neither unusual for young black female adolescents to leave home young nor to marry at an early age. Wallace, in a sense, had a guardian in her older brother George, who was probably about eighteen years old when he moved to New Orleans and took Sippie with him.<sup>74</sup> Some of the young girls who would later become blues women did not have the benefit of family when they reached their destination points, but they sometimes had friends who would put them up, at least temporarily. Young black females could find domestic work at a very young age. Alberta Hunter, who left her home in Memphis for Chicago at the age of sixteen, in part because her grandmother moved to Denver, and also because she realized that she just could not tolerate southern racial repression, provides a good example of a single girl who survived on her wits in Chicago until she established herself as a singer. First staying with an older female friend from Memphis, Hunter pleaded for and received a job peeling potatoes and cleaning up at the boarding house where her friend worked as a cook. Still sixteen, Hunter next found work singing at a

seedy Chicago dive bar called Dago Frank's where she worked for two years before she landed a job singing at the more prestigious Dreamland Ballroom.<sup>75</sup> Life in Memphis exposed Hunter to W.C. Handy's marching band and Beale Street, something akin to Broadway for black musical performers at that time, while she was a young girl residing in Memphis. Hunter's romance with show business was not an anomaly amongst southern girls. The traveling minstrel troupes and tent shows that roamed the South were the first indication to Sippie Wallace that her musical desires lay far from sacred hymns, and they lured away many of the other young women who would become blues artists, such as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey. Rainey allegedly left her home in Columbus, Georgia with a troupe at the age of fourteen.<sup>76</sup> It is quite conceivable that the troupes became something like family to the teenage performers.

Until 1917, Sippie remained in New Orleans as part of a musical family that now included George, her younger brother Hersal and George's daughter Hociel. While too young to go to nightclubs, Sippie attended regular jam sessions that George held in their apartment, where she became acquainted with musicians she encountered later as a professional, such as Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, Clarence Williams and Fats Waller. When Storyville closed in 1917, George joined the exodus to Chicago and Sippie headed back to Houston, where she met and married her second husband, Matt Wallace. Both her parents had died by the time she got back to her hometown.<sup>77</sup> Still smitten with show business, Wallace finagled a job as a maid and a stage assistant on a road show that traveled throughout Texas with the hope of drawing the attention of show people to her own talent. It worked. She was soon singing on the traveling show and making her reputation as the Texas Nightingale.

Meanwhile, George, working as a composer and a song publisher for W.W. Kimball Company and the director of his own orchestra, wanted Sippie, Hersal and Hociel to join him in

Chicago.<sup>78</sup> In 1923, Sippie, her second husband Matt Wallace, her brother Hersal, and Hociel moved north to join George.”<sup>79</sup> St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, the sociologists and authors of *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, describe Chicago’s black belt as a “colony” of African Americans. A long, relatively narrow strip on the South Side of Chicago, the black belt, or Bronzeville, was by that time an overcrowded ghetto where overpriced housing and related diseases prevailed. During the 1920s, hostile ethnic groups such as lower-class Irish- and prosperous Jewish-Americans bordered the long black belt on both sides and guarded its territorial expansion. Hate crimes and bombings of Bronzeville homes became common in the 1920s.<sup>80</sup> In 1925, Chicago had the lowest death rate for any American city with over one-hundred thousand in population, but the death rate of blacks doubled that of whites. Extremely skewed in cases of tuberculosis and venereal disease, the morbidity rate for African Americans was twenty-five times that of whites. Drake and Cayton relate both diseases to a poor standard of living and an ignorance of hygiene.<sup>81</sup>

The sociologists also presented figures on the work available to African American women in Chicago. On the eve of the Depression, most African American women performed service work. Among several service occupations, twenty-thousand women did general domestic work and many more worked in related service occupations such as laundry work, elevator service, and became cleaners, janitors, and waitresses. Drake and Cayton also list ten “clean” occupational classifications for black women, and the number of African American women working under those classifications is quite small in comparison to those working in service occupations. The “clean” categories employing black women included actress, messenger girl, restaurateur, and musician. Sippie Wallace was one of a small minority of about two-hundred black female musicians who found work in Chicago.<sup>82</sup>



Record buyers who made up the African American market that supported race records were demanding a more southern sound when Wallace signed to Okeh Records in 1923. In October, Okeh issued Sippie's "Shorty George," which she co-wrote with her brother George.<sup>83</sup> "Shorty George" was backed by a composition of her own called "Up the Country Blues." New York's Columbia Records had just made the biggest splash in the race field by signing Bessie Smith to a recording contract. Smith's first record, released in June, 1923, sold an unprecedented seven-hundred-and-eighty-thousand copies within months of its release and Bessie's relatively unadulterated southern sound forced white record company men to conclude that the African American record-buying public, fresh from the South themselves in many cases, preferred the southern sound.<sup>84</sup> From that point on, it was common for some of the record companies to venture south with field recording equipment and bring "unknowns" back to their Northern recording studios. It was no coincidence that Paramount Records released Ma Rainey and Her Georgia Jazz Band records shortly thereafter. Similarly, Okeh latched onto Sippie Wallace, a southerner, a songwriter, an experienced performer, and an all-around professional entertainer.<sup>85</sup>

An African American presence on the business side of the recording industry first made itself known with the founding of Black Swan Records. African American music entrepreneur Harry Pace collaborated with W. C. Handy in January 1921 to launch Black Swan (the Pace Phonograph Company). Black Swan dove into the race market that year and pledged to produce a wide spectrum of musical offerings by African American artists – "not just blues."<sup>86</sup> One indication of the label's wish to distance itself from the "low-down" blues can be inferred from its passing on Bessie Smith in 1921. Instead, Black Swan focused on the more sophisticated Philadelphia born and bred vaudeville blues singer Ethel Waters. Because of her southern

stylizations, though, Bessie Smith proved unacceptable to any label until 1923.<sup>87</sup> Having run into serious debt in a matter of three years, Black Swan sold its assets to Paramount Records in 1924.<sup>88</sup> Paramount bought the label and still marketed its imprint, but Black Swan could not sustain its pledge for all black content and black ownership any longer. For a short time, though, it could boast of its African-American content as well as all African American stockholders. In *The Defender*, Black Swan regularly advertised a wide range of African American talent. “The only records using exclusively Negro voices and musicians,” reads a July 1921, advertisement in *The Defender*.<sup>89</sup> Whether it was tokenism or enlightened self-interest behind Paramount’s hiring of African American recording director J. Mayo Williams – as well as its 1924 purchase of Black Swan Records and its retention of Harry Pace – it was Williams who brought Ma Rainey to Paramount. With Rainey came a southern women’s blues that did nothing to disguise its raw, rural roots, which meant, as blues scholars would later put it, its authenticity, and negritude.<sup>90</sup> A revolution from the bottom up occurred in the blues field of the 1920s in that working-class people steered the market in terms of desired content, and neither the record companies nor the black middle class could do much to stave it off. The record companies, however, did not give in to African American demands for better-quality products and more affordable prices.

Competition among record labels for the race market was fierce. Paramount advertised as “the quality race record.”<sup>91</sup> Ajax, a small and short-lived Canadian label that issued race records exclusively, touted itself first as the “superior race record” and then “the quality race record.”<sup>92</sup> In all actuality, there was little quality to be found in any of the race records. Chintzy products to begin with, and designed to be so since they sold primarily to African Americans, they were often unshellacked and became useless after about fifty plays. The records, which were not cheap at the time, cost anywhere from seventy-five cents to a dollar, a price that was

dear to many working-class people in the 1920s.<sup>93</sup> Although race records made up a relatively small percentage of overall record sales, they were cheap to make and sold for a tremendous profit. They made the record companies' exploitation of the African American population threefold. The record companies reaped profit from sales, profit from shoddy production, and profit from recording artists, musicians, and songwriters, who were paid much less than they were worth and often sold their publishing rights to the companies for a minimal flat fee.

Blatantly racist and stereotypical depictions of African Americans in rural settings often supported the condescending hyperbole in the print advertisements for the blues women. Since many migrants and potential consumers still held a soft spot for home, in spite of Jim Crow, the advertisements' creators often depicted blues singers in a down-home setting to evoke nostalgia.<sup>94</sup> The way advertisers presented the blues women was no less pandering, and, depending on the record company, they portrayed women in the common stereotypes of the mammy, the sapphire and the jezebel, but visual depictions of the women in the advertisements did not always reveal these stereotypes. Paramount Records depicted Ma Rainey in an almost dignified fashion, and usually used only a line drawing of her head and shoulders and depicted her wearing dangling earrings and her trademark necklace made of gold coins, but Mayo Williams, a black consultant hired by the company to help with the advertisements, approved these ads. Columbia Records also used inset headshots of Clara Smith and Bessie Smith, but also included in one advertisement a drawing of a minstrel-like blackface caricature of a gaudily-dressed black woman wielding a meat cleaver. The advertising copy accompanying the graphic depictions often revealed more sexual stereotyping than the graphics. The advertising copy hinted at salacious content in the songs, and the women were often depicted being extremely dangerous sapphires in the advertisements, especially when violence fit into the

subject matter of the songs: Bessie Smith spills fire and fury in ‘Hateful Blues,’” reads the meat cleaver ad. Clara Smith has “murder in her eye” in an ad for “Mean Papa.”<sup>95</sup> The advertisements often attempted to mimic the black vernacular, and a 1924 ad for Sippie Wallace’s self-penned “Underworld Blues” is typical: “The newest Okeh Record of Sippie’s is some powerful wicked blues and no mistake. It is probably the sobbin’est, groaninest, weepin’est, moanin’est blues you ever heard.”<sup>96</sup> That these highly ambiguous and often overtly racist full-page advertisements appeared in *The Defender* is a testament to capitalism’s capacity to trump the newspaper’s general defense of the Race. On the other hand, white recording companies and black middle-class institutions also bent to the will of the masses of working-class African American consumers, who demanded more authentic blues and increased representation in the industry.

The regal titles adhering to the blues women of the 1920s seemed beholden to a combination of record company hyperbole and the earnest appreciation and devotion of African-American blues fans. Taken on a superficial level, the queens and their blues provided audiences with entertainment, comedy, novelty, and escape. A theatrical blues performance was all those things, but it was also a spiritual, cathartic, and communal experience that transcended what later would be depicted as crass entertainment.<sup>97</sup> The blues women, particularly Bessie Smith, achieved a level of popularity on par with men deemed race leaders, or political leaders of the Race like Ida Wells Barnett.<sup>98</sup> The blues queens espoused a politics of their own – the politics of women’s liberation and individual freedom. When the blues women sang their stories, audiences understood collectively and communally.<sup>99</sup> Their audiences, which contained members who, in many cases, traveled hundreds of miles to find that the northern Promised Land was as much a

cold, hateful and unyielding place as it was a land of opportunity, absorbed the blues' blend of despair and hope as well as its spiritual message of freedom.

The blues woman, who traversed both north and south as a performer and was a participant in and a chronicler of the Great Migration, brought that message of the gritty reality of migration to inexperienced southerners wishing to relocate, and to experienced graduates of the Great Migration.<sup>100</sup> The appreciation that African Americans held for blues women and their blues, and the symbiotic relationship between blues and gospel, is addressed in literature on the blues.<sup>101</sup> Remarking on Ma Rainey, Langston Hughes said, "a Ma Rainey concert was rivaled only by the spirited congregational ceremonies of the Holiness Churches."<sup>102</sup> One of Bessie Smith's musicians remarked, "She was very close to God, very religious . . . that's why her blues seemed like hymns."<sup>103</sup> As both secular entertainment and a spiritual happening, a theatrical blues performance offered audience participants opportunities to find at least a temporary respite from new or different constraints of race, class, and gender that broke out with the migration. With their songs, the blues women delivered parcels of African and African American folk wisdom, and the act of "preachin' the blues," in which blues women would pour everything they had into melodic sermonettes, usually based on the intricacies of one-on-one relationships, became a much-anticipated part of their act.<sup>104</sup> Though often bawdy and diametrically opposed to the teachings of the Christian church, a blues woman's performance could nevertheless become a highly spiritual performance and a cultural event.

The attention the blues queens paid to their visual presentation augmented their regal titles.<sup>105</sup> Detroit poet Robert Hayden sat in the audience at Detroit's Koppin Theater against the wishes of his father when Bessie Smith paid one of her many visits to Detroit in the 1920s. He later wrote "Homage to the Empress of the Blues." In the poem, Hayden describes Smith

wearing “yards of pearls . . . beaded satin . . . [and] . . . ostrich feathers.”<sup>106</sup> In 1924, Bessie Smith made her second appearance at the Koppin Theater, a boarded-up 1500-seat former nickelodeon on Gratiot that was rescued and reopened in 1919 by Jewish American Henry S. Koppin.<sup>107</sup> The Empress of the Blues did not let her Detroit fans down while she performed there. Wearing satin gowns and what biographer Chris Albertson describes as headgear “that was a cross between a football helmet and a tasseled lamp shade,” Bessie preached the blues. As Hayden recalls, this meant songs of “Faithless Two Timing Love Oh Love Oh Careless Aggravating Love.”<sup>108</sup> In 1924, New Orleans native Lizzie Miles, whose stage experience began in the world of the traveling circus where she used to ride horses bareback and allow pigeons to light on her shoulders, became the first African American woman to perform in Paris. In Paris, she earned the name *La Rose Noir*. She translated that to “The Black Rose of Paris” when she returned stateside. While in Paris, Miles obtained dazzling stage costumes, and “shoes with rhinestone heels,” to present to audiences back home.<sup>109</sup> Exotic in appearance, the blues queens dazzled their audiences and provided a display of black pride that likely impressed the primarily working-class theater patrons.

The body thus adorned signified more than mere finery or a display of the blues woman’s earning power; it represented a self-determined, liberated sexuality. Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, “the Mother of the Blues,” started her show singing from inside a huge Victrola while her pianist and sometimes composer Thomas A. Dorsey accompanied her on piano. When doors on the front of the machine opened to permit the stage entrance of Ma Rainey, she would “step into the spotlight with her glittering gown that weighed twenty pounds wearing a necklace of five, ten and twenty dollar gold pieces . . . the house went wild,” Dorsey recalled.<sup>110</sup> Sippie Wallace also paid strict attention to presentation. Like Rainey, the Texas Nightingale hid inside a large record machine

when the lights dimmed. Matt Wallace, a gambler whom she met and married in Houston prior to her arrival in Chicago, announced to the audience that Sippie would not be able to perform. The husband and stagehand then proceeded to the seven-foot Victrola with a large record, purportedly a recording of Sippie. When the record played, Sippie's real voice burst through the contraption before the huge box opened to reveal Sippie, feather boa around her neck and wearing a sequined gown.<sup>111</sup> In the hands of the blues queens, female sexuality enshrouded a woman's desires instead of becoming a representation of female sexuality meant to satisfy male expectations. The wardrobe and the women were both a testament to what Carby describes as an "empowered presence."<sup>112</sup>

Sippie's debut record, "Shorty George," was as dazzling as her stage show and it quickly topped sales of one-hundred-thousand. Perhaps more importantly, Wallace lived among family in Chicago. Her older brother George had already succeeded in the Chicago music world. She had a new husband in Matt Wallace, who sometimes acted as her manager. She arranged with Okeh Records owner Ralph Peer to hire her younger brother Hersal Thomas as her pianist. In 1925, first the Gennett label and then the Okeh label released records by George's daughter, Sippie's niece, and fellow blues singer, Hociel Thomas. Hociel stayed with Okeh until 1929.<sup>113</sup> It seemed like Sippie Wallace came to the right place at the right time. She was a polished, standout artist who could write a song, record it, and present it with panache, owing to her years of experience. Underlining it all, Sippie could sell records. One-hundred dollars just for making a record may have sounded like a fortune to her. She was eager to make as many recordings as possible. Sippie became a headliner on the TOBA circuit, and, for seven years, she recorded regularly at the Okeh studios in New York and Chicago.<sup>114</sup> A small sampling of her song titles reflect the era in which the records appeared. The emergence of the New Negro and popularity

among the working class of figures like Marcus Garvey, who emphasized racial pride, are apparent in “I’m So Glad I’m a Brown Skin.” “Murder’s Going to Be My Crime” and “I’ve Stopped My Man,” turn on the theme of a woman’s violent revenge against a wrongdoing man, which was a theme of “classic blues.” One of the few erotic songs Sippie wrote--“I’m a Mighty Tight Woman--” is sexual braggadocio, a theme that courses through the blues in general, but it is also Sippie’s ode to being herself, and getting her own way. It reveals an assertive female sexuality, and Sippie expresses fearlessness and a willingness to take on whatever comes her way:

*‘Cause I’m a mighty tight woman, I’m a real tight woman,  
I’m a jack-of-all trades  
I can be your sweet woman, also be yo’ slave  
I can do things so good, till you will not see yo’ head*

*If you’re a married man, you ain’t got no business here  
‘Cause when you’re out with me, I’ll make your wife shed tears  
‘Cause I’m a mighty tight woman, and there is nothing that I fear<sup>115</sup>*

In her bargain with Okeh, Sippie intentionally gave up royalties and copyrights that would have vastly increased and extended her earnings because she preferred to be paid a flat fee for each recording.<sup>116</sup> She may have had little choice, because even well-schooled and sharp businessmen like Handy and Bradford – the latter famously told Okeh executives “Perry Bradford doesn’t waive anything but the American flag”—found collecting royalties to be difficult, if not fruitless, work.<sup>117</sup> As “interpreters” who scoured the South in an effort to hear blues that they could adapt as their own songs, Handy and Bradford also exploited African American talent.<sup>118</sup> In the heyday of the blues women, exploitation in the music industry recognized no color line, but some of the women did better than others.<sup>119</sup> Columbia Records paired Bessie Smith with an unusually considerate record executive named Frank Walker, a white man in charge of rural southern recordings who set aside royalties for her. Regardless, she



was sheared by a succession of go-betweens, including African-American show business entrepreneur Clarence Williams, who acted as Bessie Smith's first manager. Even the relatively noble Walker, who set aside \$20,000 in royalties for Smith appears to have dipped into the kitty; her record sales indicated she should have received \$30,875.<sup>120</sup> But Bessie Smith was Bessie Smith. Sippie Wallace was not. Okeh Records paid Wallace a flat fee of \$100 per side. In contracting with Okeh to receive the flat-fee payments, Wallace waived her right to collect royalties, even on songs she wrote.<sup>121</sup>

Raking in 128 million dollars, the recording industry enjoyed a banner year in 1926, but radio and talking moving pictures ascended simultaneously.<sup>122</sup> By 1929, annual record sales had dipped to six-million dollars.<sup>123</sup> Taking note of the blues women's declining recording sales, the major record companies turned their attention to male "country" blues singers who were paid far less than the blues women.<sup>124</sup> A combination of factors had put an end to the blues women craze of the 1920s, including the 1929 stock market crash and the Great Depression, which threw many musicians out of work and bankrupted record companies. The end of Prohibition closed many venues, as did the advent of talking films and radio, which spelled the end for vaudeville, and, consequently, most of the theatrical blues queens.<sup>125</sup>

Like many great blues artists, Sippie Wallace lived the blues in both her personal and professional lives. In 1929, Victor released Wallace's most enduring record, "I'm a Mighty Tight Woman," on which she accompanied herself on piano, and without supporting musicians. Victor did not bother to release her last record, "Ain't Nobody Home but Me," until many years later.<sup>126</sup> The personal tragedies Sippie Wallace endured before moving to Detroit in 1929 may have dwarfed any concerns she may have had about her diminishing presence in show business. In 1925, Sippie was called to the bedside of her sister, Lillie, who died in Texas that year. The

following year, Hersal, her accompanist, show business running partner, and dearest brother, died of food poisoning.<sup>127</sup> After moving to Detroit with her husband, Sippie continued to receive stage bookings until about 1932, but she eventually faded into obscurity due to the changing demands of a business in flux. She had neither the versatility needed to stick around, nor the stellar drawing power of Bessie Smith, who recorded until 1933. Sippie did not have the talent, or perhaps the desire, to pick up work as an actress, and she lacked the confidence to step in somewhere as a comedienne or a chanteuse. Daphne Duvall Harrison writes, “Hers was a raw-country style talent well-suited to belting the blues, but not to sweet mellow ballads.”<sup>128</sup>

The rush of humanity to Detroit that began when Henry Ford baited all comers in 1914 with the offer of \$5 a day kept coming, with the 1930 African American population nearly tripling the 1920 count.<sup>129</sup> In all likelihood, Matt Wallace neither had a liking for Ford’s ways nor a desire to work in one of the many automotive factories that served as magnets for bringing both black and white southerners to the Motor City. Wallace liked gambling, and if it was gambling he was after, he would find it in Detroit. The Wallaces found an established, African American city-within-a-city in Paradise Valley.<sup>130</sup> Between the years of 1915 and 1925, Detroit received more African Americans than any other major city in the United States based on population percentage. Most of the black migrants found housing in Paradise Valley.<sup>131</sup> In terms of its concentration of African Americans and its seemingly quarantined ghetto boundaries, Paradise Valley was not unlike Chicago’s Bronzeville.

Apart from insolvency, or the blade of a knife, a gambler like Wallace had nothing to fear but the police, and the city’s practically all-white police force paid little attention to the city’s African American population or its black ghetto. Paradise Valley was a tangle of societal contradictions and ramshackle housing near Detroit’s downtown that the city’s Jewish

population had all but abandoned by 1925 and left to African Americans.<sup>132</sup> In Paradise Valley, gambling dens, policy kings, houses of prostitution, illicit drugs, and black-and-tan speakeasies and cabarets thrived alongside churches, upright businessmen, hard-working laboring men, and women during Prohibition's last years.<sup>133</sup> An acutely observant boy, Robert Hayden recognized this variety as part of a unified whole that was the ghetto. He eulogized his childhood home years later after he came of age and the neighborhood met the wrecking ball to make way for a freeway:

*My shared bedroom window  
 Opened on alley stench  
 A junkie died in maggots there  
 I saw his body shoved inside a van  
 I saw the hatred for our kind  
 Glistening like tears  
 In the policemen's eyes<sup>134</sup>*

Detroit's lack of record companies at the time can partly explain why the city did not attract a blues queen of its own until Sippie Wallace made her way to Detroit, but that is not to say that the city was not on its way to developing its own blues culture by then. Detroit's proximity to Chicago and Chicago record companies allowed blues recording artists like Blind Blake to shuttle back and forth between the two cities. Besides the traveling blues queens, who made frequent stops in the city, the unique clash between the primarily rural southerners and the pervasive and rapidly accelerating assembly-line rhythms of what was then becoming the Motor City combined to produce a blues sound unique to Detroit. Northern cities like Detroit and Chicago became melting pots of different rural blues styles that developed in the American South. Historian Ray Pratt identifies three styles of country blues: Mississippi Country Blues, East Texas Country Blues, and the "Piedmont Tradition" of the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida.<sup>135</sup> In the context of the North, these distinctions blur. The bending, reshaping and

reforming of these styles occurred in the era of the blues queens in cities like Detroit, where Sippie Wallace brought an urbanized version of the Texas country blues to Detroit nightclubs and speakeasies. Likewise, boogie-woogie pianists like Big Maceo (Maceo Merriweather), Speckled Red (Rufus Perryman), Charles Spand, and Will Ezell brought southern boogie-woogie that would in two decades serve alongside to forge John Lee Hooker's distinctive blues style as much as his Mississippi Delta roots.<sup>136</sup> Blind Blake, who came from Florida, lived in Georgia, and settled in Chicago while also spending a good deal of time in Detroit, as evidenced by his "Detroit Bound Blues," and "Hastings Street," brought the Piedmont style to Detroit.

The blues queens, who as itinerant troubadours probably stayed in Detroit as much as they did in any other stop on the TOBA circuit, are crucial to an understanding of what went into Detroit blues. The blues women, with their combined traditions of vaudeville, minstrelsy, jazz, and blues, were the first Americans to meld together an array of regional blues sounds. Multitudes of black Americans, male and female, young and old, and even some white Americans, enjoyed the performances and recorded sounds of the blues queens. In *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, Lawrence W. Levine notes the paradox of the blues, which is that the "invention" first appears in the modern world of the late nineteenth century as a highly individualized, modern form of musical expression. However, based on African traditions, blues music draws from the past. The blues women, who in many cases controlled the lyrics and meaning of the blues, spoke in the first person of individual experience. Perhaps more importantly, however, they included themselves and their audiences in musical portraits that revealed shared experience and spoke to a collective "we" that contained African Americans migrants in general, and African American women in particular.<sup>137</sup>

- <sup>9</sup> Daphne Duvall Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990).
- <sup>10</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon, 1998), 9.
- <sup>11</sup> Wright, Josephine and Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *New Perspectives on Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern* (Warren, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 1992), 126.
- Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 44.
- <sup>12</sup> Ma Rainey had been performing blues-influenced songs since 1902. Sandra R. Leib, *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey* (Boston: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), xiv.
- <sup>13</sup> Carby, Hazel V. "It Just Be Dat Way Sometimes: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," *Radical America* 20 (Winter 1986): 10.
- <sup>14</sup> Kevin J. Muford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), xviii.
- <sup>15</sup> Hammonds, Evelyn. "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, nos. 2-3 (1994):126-145.
- <sup>16</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 121-122.
- <sup>17</sup> Theresa L. Reed, *The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Culture* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 11.
- <sup>18</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 173.
- <sup>19</sup> Ray Pratt, *Rhythm and Resistance: Explorations in the Political Uses of Popular Music* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 79; Thomas L. Morgan and William Barlow, *From Cakewalks to Concert Halls: An Illustrated History of African-American Popular Music from 1895 to 1930* (Washington DC: Elliot and Clark Publishing, 1992); 21. Josephine Wright and Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *New Perspectives*, 126.
- <sup>20</sup> Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (New York: Viking Press, 1981), 40-43.
- <sup>21</sup> Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 42.
- <sup>22</sup> Luc Sante, "The Genius of Blues," *New York Review of Books*, 11 August 1944, 49.
- <sup>23</sup> Handy generally based his compositions on folk blues that he had heard in his trips down south. He often matched the lyrics of the blues to one of his own melodies. Barlow, William. *Looking Up at Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 123.
- <sup>24</sup> William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 112-113.
- <sup>25</sup> Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 12-13.
- <sup>26</sup> Paul Oliver, *Broadcasting the Blues: Black Blues in the Segregation Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 132.
- <sup>26</sup> Perry Bradford, *Born with the Blues* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 132.
- <sup>27</sup> Michael W. Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 64.
- <sup>28</sup> Paul Oliver, *Broadcasting the Blues*, 59.
- <sup>29</sup> Lawrence Cohn, *Nothing but the Blues: The Music and the Musicians* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), 209.
- <sup>30</sup> William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 112-113.
- <sup>31</sup> Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 113.
- <sup>32</sup> Bradford, *Born with the Blues*, 132. Paul Oliver, *Broadcasting*, 3.
- <sup>33</sup> Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, 18-20.
- <sup>34</sup> Lynn Abbot and Doug Seroff, *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, "coon songs," and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), 207.
- <sup>35</sup> Although it is relatively easy to pinpoint some of these technical- and business-oriented inventions (such as Thomas Edison's invention of the first phonograph in 1877, the establishment of Tin Pan Alley in 1885, and the formation of the black vaudeville circuit, which developed out of the 1909 formation of the Theater Owner's Booking Association), they really were the beginning of processes that developed over a number of years before they had an impact on the general population in the United States. Edison used cylinders for his phonograph, and those were rendered obsolete by Emile Berliner's 1889 invention of the phonograph disc, which did not become commercially successful until the 1910s when phonograph machines became mass-produced and consequently affordable for many Americans, both black and white. Likewise, Tin Pan Alley, founded by a group of New York music publishers in 1885, developed along a similar timeline, and did not become the "beehive" of activity that it was known as until recorded music became popular. The black vaudeville circuit, a network of black theaters

booked almost exclusively by the Theater Owner's Booking Association, grew through the 1910s and into the 1920s. The musical genres developed in a similar fashion. Blues, "invented" sometime near the end of the nineteenth century, did not find commercial success until the 1910s. Jazz, played by black musical artists such as Buddy Bolden and Jelly Roll Morton at the turn of the century, did not get "hot" among white audiences until the late 1910s. Ragtime's peak years were between 1897 and 1918. Therefore, the commercial intersection of all these inventions did not occur until the 1910s and their commercial products were first aimed at the white marketplace in the North. Morgan and Barlow, *From Cakewalks*, 45; H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie, eds., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan Press: 1986), 3, 267, 396; Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 232-24.

<sup>36</sup> Morgan and Barlow, *From Cakewalks*, 45. Exceptions included Jim Europe's and Ford Dabney's society orchestras, comedian Bert Williams, and coon shouter, George W. Johnson (coon songs take up melodies and structures of popular songs and add distinctively African-American lyrics to them). Cohn, *Nothing but the Blues*, 88.

<sup>37</sup> William Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 127.

<sup>38</sup> Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 113.

<sup>39</sup> Morgan and Barlow, *From Cakewalks*, 53.

<sup>40</sup> Wright and Floyd, Jr., *New Perspectives*, 235.

<sup>41</sup> M.K. Dolan, *Cathartic Uplift: A Cultural History of Blues and Jazz in the Chicago Defender, 1920-1929* (Ph.D. diss., University of South Carolina, 2003), 101.

<sup>42</sup> Wolcott, Victoria W., *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 100.

Richard W. Thomas, *Life for Us is what we Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 175.

<sup>43</sup> Spencer, "The Diminishing Rural Residue of Folklore in City and Urban Blues, Chicago 1915-1950," *Black Music Research Journal* 12 (Spring, 1992): 33.

<sup>44</sup> "Fame and Fortune: Blues Discs Making Race Composers Rich," *The Chicago Defender* (National Edition), 6 October 1923.

<sup>45</sup> "Come Along Mandy at the Grand; Bessie Smith and Co. at the Avenue: Gaines Brothers Pack the Monogram," *The Chicago Defender*, 10 May 1924.

<sup>46</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 46. Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 118.

<sup>47</sup> Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 118. Some of the record companies, such as Paramount, which was the parent company of OKeh, provided mail-in coupons in *The Chicago Defender* for rural areas. John Godrich and Robert M. W. Dixon, in *Recording the Blues*, in Paul Oliver, Tony Russell, Robert M.W. Dixon, John Godrich and Howard Rye, *Yonder Come the Blues: The Evolution of a Genre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 264.

<sup>48</sup> Bradford, *Born with the Blues*, 126.

<sup>49</sup> Elijah Wald writes that "Crazy Blues" was typical of the "sophisticated vaudeville style," and the instrumentation was that of a "hot band of black jazz players." Wald says that Smith, a polished vaudeville performer who followed a wave of white women singing blues songs, sang in a "diction that was at least as 'white' as that of the white singers who specialized in blues or 'Negro' songs." Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, 20-21. According to Robert Palmer, "The number was more a vaudeville tune than a blues, and the singer's urbane style was accurately reflected in her label billing—'Mamie Smith, contralto.'" However, Palmer adds that "Crazy Blues" was "closer to the main currents of black popular music than anything that had been on records before." Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 106. William Barlow writes that the term "classic blues" was first circulated in the 1940s and 1950s by jazz historians "to characterize an earlier jazz era and style." Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 137. Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) notes that, "What has been called 'classic blues' was the result of more diverse sociological and musical influences than any other kind of American Negro music called blues." Leroi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow, 1963), 81.

<sup>50</sup> Marybeth Hamilton writes that the term "authenticity" in relation to blues music was invented by blues commentators in the late 1950s in the midst of the first big blues revival. Marybeth Hamilton, "Sexuality, Authenticity, and the Making of the Blues Tradition," *Past & Present* 169 (Nov. 2000): 134.

<sup>51</sup> Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 10.

<sup>52</sup> Jones, *Blues People*, 81.

<sup>53</sup> Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky": Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 17; On ragtime, see H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie, eds., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, v. 4 (London: Macmillan Press, 1986), 4.

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- <sup>54</sup> *The Formation of Modern American Mass Culture*, accessed 8 May 2011, [http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/article\\_display.cfm?HHID=455](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/article_display.cfm?HHID=455).
- <sup>55</sup> Bradford, *Born with the Blues*, 114.
- <sup>56</sup> Jones, *Blues People*, 92.
- <sup>57</sup> Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 56.
- <sup>58</sup> Hamilton, "Sexuality," 134. The BBC Records' offshoot, Vocalion Records, reacting to the double entendres and overt sexuality contained in many "classic blues" records launched a race records division labeled as "Better and Cleaner Race Records" in 1925 that operated until 1928. Godrich and Dixon, *Recording the Blues*, 270.
- <sup>59</sup> Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 142.
- <sup>60</sup> George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 327-328.
- <sup>61</sup> Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 67, 85.
- <sup>62</sup> Godrich and Dixon, *Recording the Blues*, 277, 288.
- <sup>63</sup> Sandra Leib, *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey* (Boston: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 3.
- <sup>64</sup> Chris Albertson, *Bessie* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 2003), 14.
- <sup>65</sup> Hine, *Black Women*, 590.
- <sup>66</sup> Jon Michael Spencer, *Blues and Evil* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 32-33.
- <sup>67</sup> Delores Korb, "Sippie's Blues," *The Detroit News Magazine*. (June 13, 1976).
- <sup>68</sup> Dixon and Godrich, *Blues and Gospel Records*, 797-798.
- <sup>69</sup> Korb, "Sippie's Blues," 42.
- <sup>70</sup> Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 81.
- <sup>71</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 117.
- <sup>72</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 115.
- <sup>73</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 117.
- <sup>74</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 19, 116.
- <sup>75</sup> Frank C. Taylor with Gerald Cook, *Alberta Hunter: A Celebration in Blues* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986), 17-29.
- <sup>76</sup> Sandra R. Leib, *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey* (Boston, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 1.
- <sup>77</sup> Maryann George, "Detroit has a national Treasure. Her Name is Sippie Wallace," *Detroit Free Press*, (16 September 1979), 12. Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 119.
- <sup>78</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 120.
- <sup>79</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 120-121.
- <sup>80</sup> St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis: a Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, Revised and enlarged edition, vols. I-II (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1970), 62.
- <sup>81</sup> Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 202.
- <sup>82</sup> Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 220-221.
- <sup>83</sup> Dixon and Godrich, *Blues and Gospel Records*, 797.
- <sup>84</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 83.
- <sup>85</sup> Dixon and Godrich, *Blues and Gospel Records*, 605.
- <sup>86</sup> Dixon and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, 13. Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 128.
- <sup>87</sup> Albertson, *Bessie*, 25.
- <sup>88</sup> Barlow, *Looking up at Down*, 128.
- <sup>89</sup> Franz Hoffman, *Jazz Advertised in the Negro Press Volume 4: The Chicago Defender, 1910-1934* (Berlin: Privately Printed, 1981).
- <sup>90</sup> Dixon and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, 22-23.
- <sup>91</sup> Dixon and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, 36.
- <sup>92</sup> Dixon and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, 32.
- <sup>93</sup> Luc Sante, "The Genius of Blues," *New York Review of Books*, 11 August 1944, 49. William Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 114-115.
- <sup>94</sup> Dolan, *Cathartic Uplift*, 101.
- <sup>95</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 60, 83-84; Mark K. Dolan, "Extra! *Chicago Defender* Race Records Ads Show South from Afar," *Southern Cultures* 13, no 3 (2007): 106-124.
- <sup>96</sup> Spencer, *Blues and Evil*, 7.

- <sup>97</sup> Dolan, *Cathartic Uplift*, iii.
- <sup>98</sup> Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 164-165.
- <sup>99</sup> See also, Carby and Harrison.
- <sup>100</sup> Carby, "It Jus Be Dat Way:" 16.
- <sup>101</sup> See James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 97-127.
- <sup>102</sup> Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 158.
- <sup>103</sup> Spencer, *Blues and Evil*, 43.
- <sup>104</sup> Spencer, *Blues and Evil*, 41-42.
- <sup>105</sup> The costuming of the blues queens has been likened by historian Lynn Abbott to the highly formal presentations of the operatic African American singers like Sissieretta Jones and other queens of song, who predated the blues women and were popular among the African American and white middle classes. For more on similar performers, see Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music, 1889-1895* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2002).
- <sup>106</sup> Robert Hayden, *Collected Poems*, edited by Frank Glaysher with an introduction by Arnold Rampersad (New York: Liveright Publishing, 1996), 32.
- <sup>107</sup> Koppin immediately received bad press from *The Defender* for not having an African-American theater manager. The Chicago paper, which had a good deal of influence in Detroit, ran an article in 1920 headlined "Koppin: That's the Name of the Money Grabber who 'Fattens' in Detroit." A keen businessman, Koppin hired African American Tim Owsley to manage the theater. E. B. Dudley, an established African-American entrepreneur who owned and managed several TOBA theaters, including Detroit's Vaudette, another Gratiot theater that made the switch to moving pictures in 1922, soon replaced Owsly. The Cass, on Grand River, closed to stage shows in 1922. With vaudeville theaters disappearing at such a fast pace, the Koppin became the premier TOBA Theater in the city. Eric Ledell Smith, *African-American Theater Buildings: An Illustrated Historical Directory, 1900-1955* (London: McFarland and Co., 2003), 846. Lars Bjorn with Jim Gallert, *Before Motown: A History of Jazz in Detroit, 1920-1960* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 6-7. Smith, *African-American Theater Buildings*, 120. Galbraith Stuart IV, *Motor City Marquees: A Comprehensive, Illustrated Reference to Motion Picture Theaters in the Detroit Area, 1906-1922* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Co., 1994), 36.
- <sup>108</sup> Albertson, *Bessie*, 67. Hayden, *Collected Poems*, 32.
- <sup>109</sup> Richard B. Allen, Interview with Lizzie Miles (Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University, 18 January 1951); Lynn Abbot and Doug Seroff, "Lizzie Miles: Her Forgotten Career in Sideshow Minstrelsy, 1914-1918," 78 *Quarterly* 7 (1992): 56; Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 237.
- <sup>110</sup> Leib, *Mother of the Blues*, 30.
- <sup>111</sup> George, "Detroit Has a National Treasure," 9-10. Dixon and Godrich, *Blues and Gospel Records*, 752-753.
- <sup>112</sup> Hazel V. Carby, *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* (London: Verso, 1999), 8.
- <sup>113</sup> George, "Detroit Has a National Treasure," 9-10
- <sup>114</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 127-128.
- <sup>115</sup> Sippie Wallace, "I'm a Mighty Tight Woman." Cherio Corp (ASCAP); Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 133; Dixon and Godrich, *Blues and Gospel Records, 1902-1943*, 797-798.
- <sup>116</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 171.
- <sup>117</sup> Morgan and Barlow, *From Cakewalks to Concert Halls*, 100.
- <sup>118</sup> Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 127.
- <sup>119</sup> Albertson, *Bessie*, 35.
- <sup>120</sup> Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 119-120.
- <sup>121</sup> Korb, "Sippie's Blues," 44.
- <sup>122</sup> Morgan and Barlow, *From Cakewalks*, 123; Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 130.
- <sup>123</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 61.
- <sup>124</sup> Many of the "country blues" artists signed off on their royalties and accepted a flat fee per recording. Record company employees were known to keep a lot of liquor on hand when they asked blues artists to sign contracts. Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 132; Leib, *Mother of the Blues*, 40.
- <sup>125</sup> On the effects of the stock market crash and the Depression, see Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, xviii. Victoria W. Wolcott writes of the blues singers, "These performers often began their careers in small juke joints and blind pigs where drinking was a central activity." Wolcott, *Remaking Respectibility*, 104. On men becoming dominant in the blues field, see, Cohn, *Nothing but the Blues*, 101-102.
- <sup>126</sup> Dixon and Godrich, *Blues and Gospel Records, 1902-1943*, 798.



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- <sup>127</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 128.
- <sup>128</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 133.
- <sup>129</sup> Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, 30. Melvin G. Holli, *Detroit* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1976), 271.
- <sup>130</sup> Frank Rashid, "Robert Hayden's Detroit Blues Elegies," *Callaloo* 24 (Winter, 2001): 200-226.
- <sup>131</sup> David Allan Levine, *Internal Combustion: The Races in Detroit, 1915-1926* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976), 5.
- <sup>132</sup> Sidney Bolkosky, *Harmony and Dissonance: Voices of Jewish Identity in Detroit, 1914-1967* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 97.
- <sup>133</sup> Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 103-108.
- <sup>134</sup> Hayden, *Collected Poems* (excerpt from "Elegies of Paradise Valley,"), 163.
- <sup>135</sup> Pratt, *Rhythm and Resistance*, 80.
- <sup>136</sup> Bjorn, *Before Motown*, 10.
- <sup>137</sup> Levine, *Black Culture*, 223.

## Chapter Two

## Alberta Adams and the Heyday of the Detroit Nightclub Scene, 1938-1962

The 1920s blues women were “cultural conservators” and “cultural innovators” for the ways in which they used the blues to both entertain and inform the African American population enveloped in the Great Migration.<sup>138</sup> For the black working class, they retained southern culture--a sense of tradition--as they stood poised on the cutting edge of contemporary urban music. Temporarily silenced by the economic events and the changes in the entertainment industry, black blues women began to come back in the 1930s, albeit in a somewhat jazzier form. An emblematic representation of the continuity between the blues queens of the 1920s and the ones who appeared first in the 1930s is that Bessie Smith’s last recording session and Billie Holiday’s first recording session both occurred in 1933. Angela Y. Davis argues that Holiday, often considered a jazz singer, interpreted jazz through the blues tradition within this lineage, “and specifically [the tradition] of the blues women of the 1920s.”<sup>139</sup>

Davis wrote that Holiday’s work could be associated with the 1920s blues women tradition through the connections the work reveals “between love, sexuality, individuality, and freedom.” According to Davis, three necessary conditions were required to bring about the moment of individualization in the African American community that Holiday’s work reflected so well. The conditions were the Great Migration north and the resulting urbanization of much of the African American community; the substantial number of African Americans who moved into the middle classes, and, most importantly, “the tensions and the dilemmas in the consciousness of class difference” that became apparent in Holiday’s black audiences. African Americans also dealt with demands for cultural and racial assimilation, and with the

“intransigence” of racism.<sup>140</sup> Davis presented Holiday as a pivotal figure in African American history and in the history of African American music. According to Davis, Holiday helped infuse jazz with the blues tradition, kept alive the tradition of the Race woman, and acted in a racially subversive manner by providing middle- and working-class African Americans with privileged insights regarding the dominant culture.<sup>141</sup>

“Billie’s Blues,” written by Holiday and recorded in 1936, demonstrates the above and demonstrates Holiday’s ability to reference blues songs that preceded her. With “Billie’s Blues,” Holiday composed a song that resists and rebels against the peculiar three-layered oppression related to issues of race, class, and gender that African American working-class women have experienced throughout much of the history of the United States. The song also demonstrates the female assertiveness that had become endemic to women’s blues by the time Holiday wrote “Billie’s Blues,” which can be seen as an heir to the women’s blues of the 1920s. On the surface, “Billie’s Blues” is about becoming free and establishing more balanced gender relations, but the song, with its juxtaposition of “slave” and “man” and the lyrical imagery of a “man” who is willing to starve his woman and put her outdoors, also seems allegorical in relation to the racism of Holiday’s own time. When she composed the song, African Americans were no longer slaves in a legal sense but often treated like slaves, or dogs. In the lyrical bridge of the song, the “man” (her man) is the cause of Billie’s blues:

*My man wouldn't give me no breakfast  
 Wouldn't give me no dinner  
 Squawked about my supper then he put me outdoors  
 Had the nerve to lay a matchbox on my clothes  
 I didn't have so many but I had a long way to go<sup>142</sup>*

The man’s willingness to starve the woman, put her outdoors and send her packing with practically nothing in terms of material possessions not only shows the psychological abuse that

women were subject to at the hands of men but also provides some insight into the gross economic disparities between men and women. Moreover, the bridge of the song brings to mind the class cleavages so starkly revealed in the era of the Great Depression. In the song, Holiday is perhaps hopelessly in love, but is also willing to “quit” her man if the relationship becomes unbearable. It does, of course. He treats her like a slave, which she puts up with, and then treats her like a dog, but she refuses to roll over and beg. Ultimately, what she received from another woman--her mother--is “going to tear [her] through this world.” While that could be a sexual boast it could also be something that is going to help her overcome the troubles that pass her way. By the end of the song, Holiday is no longer talking about one man, but many men. She is admired for many reasons, and she has the power to put them all together and become “everything a good man needs.” A “good man” can mean one who meets her qualifications, too. In the song, which is not without sexual double-entendre, Billie is neither acquiescing to abuse nor adoration from men. She recites some of her faults but more of her attributes, and she does not have to change to suit the desires of a man. Holiday’s sense of assertiveness and subjectivity become apparent in “Billie’s Blues,” and whether that sense is real or something devised for the sake of the song, it suggests to other women that they should determine their own value, and not leave that to men who might hold power over them.

Holiday, however, was not the only blues woman to straddle the amorphous divide between blues and jazz, nor was she alone in posing a challenge to notions of a working-class black women’s place in African American communities and in the United States. The former occurred especially in the case of swing music, labeled “swing” in relation to jazz and “jump blues” in relation to blues. Dinah Washington, known as the Queen of the Blues on a national level, began to sing professionally in 1941.<sup>143</sup> Another blues woman named Alberta Adams,

who became “Detroit’s” Queen of the Blues,” began her professional career in the late 1930s as a jazz singer. Adams, still a teenager when she entered show business, was a jazz sophisticate, just like Holiday and Washington. All three women took the traditions mapped out by the 1920s blues women, such as the focus on the paradoxes of human relationships and the yearning for freedom and liberation, and carried on and embellished those traditions. Evident in the lives of these latter day blues queens, such as Holiday, Washington, and Adams, is that they became a different kind of migrant from one who traverses land and sea. They were cross-cultural migrants who, like some latter day multicultural writers and artists, were adept at performing the kind of metaphorical border crossing now described in academic disciplines such as cultural studies.<sup>144</sup> From the later 1930s through the postwar era, these women, who often performed for mixed-race and mixed-class audiences, resisted and rebelled against seemingly intransigent race- and class-stratification through the world of show business.

Three-year-old Roberta Louise Osborne, known much later as Alberta Adams owing to a marriage and a Detroit club owner’s idea to change her given name, moved to Detroit from Indianapolis somewhere around 1920. Alberta Adams and Paradise Valley, which became Detroit’s African American ghetto around 1925 when the Jewish population moved out, practically grew up together. Paradise Valley contained the African American commercial and entertainment districts and some residences in an area of a half-mile square described in a 1938 Detroit Free Press article as bordered by John R. Street on the west, Russell Street on the east, Medbury Street on the north, and Madison Street on the south.<sup>145</sup> Later descriptions of the area show expansion. In a 1974 article for *Detroit* magazine on Paradise Valley, Elaine Moon denotes Paradise Valley’s borders as being Brush Street on the west, Hastings Street on the east, Gratiot on the north, and Vernor Highway on the south. Moon also claims that by the mid-

1930s, African-Americans owned most of the nightclubs and businesses in Paradise Valley.<sup>146</sup> Hastings and Dequindre streets bordered the east and west of Black Bottom, a severely deteriorating near east side residential neighborhood that, after the 1920s, primarily housed African Americans.<sup>147</sup> By the late 1930s, city officials began to debate whether both the areas should be part of a massive slum clearance project that would replace deteriorating housing and what served as the black downtown area with public housing projects.<sup>148</sup>

With its black-and-tans, Paradise Valley was a potential island of interracial commingling from the 1930s through the 1950s when it reigned as a center for nightlife in the otherwise racially divided city of Detroit.<sup>149</sup> By day, the area was seventy-five percent black but at night, interracial crowds filled the streets and nightclubs, according Moon.<sup>150</sup> Club owners made sure their advertisements welcomed whites, and advertisements for black-and-tans lasted well into the 1950s.<sup>151</sup> The Club B&C featured “Swift’s Black & Tan Revue.” Broad’s Club Zombie distinguished itself as “Detroit’s Oldest Black and Tan.”<sup>152</sup> Developing harmony among the races, if that was the case, was one reason to draw white patrons to the nightclubs, but increased cash receipts brought in by white “slummers” may have appealed to club owners just as much.

*The Michigan Chronicle*, Detroit’s largest African American newspaper, which was located in Paradise Valley, promoted Detroit’s African American nightclub scene with weekly entertainment columns that covered nightlife like “Swingin’ with Nightlifers,” “Swinging Down the Lane,” “Detroit After Dark,” and “Zagging with Ziggy.” As Larry Chism, original author of “Swingin’ with Nightlifers,” made clear, Paradise Valley could dazzle the senses: “It’s a place where the Cadillacs are shinier, the sports are sportier, the spots are classier, and the chicks more frantic.”<sup>153</sup> Chism, and others, regularly placed these verbal sketches of the Valley into *The Michigan Chronicle’s* columns. The following observations, taken from a subheading in the

column entitled “Hastings Street Scene,” brought readers close to the streets, if they had not already seen for themselves: “Flychicks sauntering up to cool hepcats, speaking words dripping with honey . . . Men in groups on corners discussing war, women and jobs . . . here and there an open-air checker game.” For all the “cool brown chicks” Chism observed, he did not omit the dark side of the ghetto. Paradise Valley, and its slum conditions, could cause the pleasure seeker to sink into depression as much as the lively district could evoke inspiration: “Dirty alleys emitting a nauseating odor . . . A blind woman, head bent, holding an empty cup in a wrinkled toil-worn hand.”<sup>154</sup> *The Chronicle* paid close attention to entertainment in the Valley, devoting four full pages to music, theatrical arts, and movies almost every week from the late 1930s to the early 1960s.

Growing up in the midst of this entertainment haven and crumbling ghetto, Alberta Adams developed a strong taste for show business as a youngster, which stayed with her throughout her life. She made sure to be at the Arcade and Dunbar theaters on Saturdays, where she caught vaudeville acts like the Whitman Sisters and Butterbeans and Susie.<sup>155</sup> “I’d sit there all day and watch them. Then I’d come home and I’d try some,” she said.<sup>156</sup> She also saw stars like Bessie Smith at Detroit’s biggest vaudeville house, the Koppin Theater.<sup>157</sup> Getting in free of charge during the Depression years by bringing food to the theaters, Alberta received her first informal singing and dancing lessons in Detroit theaters like the Arcade and the Dunbar: “Taking my potato to the show to get in and catch them vaudevilles coming in . . . I’d say ‘I want to be a singer. I want to be in show business’ . . . They had to put me out of the theater. They’d say, ‘little girl, you’ve got to go.’”<sup>158</sup> These quotes demonstrate Adams’s early interest in the theater and indicate that she was often alone as a child and left to her own devices.

Alberta could see that finding her own way in the world would present difficulties, and she had already had problems with her extended family, even as a young child. She stayed in her birthplace of Indianapolis, Indiana, until the age of three, after her mother abandoned her infant daughter in an orphanage. Her Aunt Pearl claimed her and brought her to Detroit. Two aunts, Aunt Pearl and Aunt America, took Alberta into their homes, but Alberta often felt slighted when an inordinate number of chores became her responsibility rather than the responsibility of two aunts' own children. Alberta described her childhood as an early introduction to the blues. She first stayed with her Aunt Pearl, and later wound up with her Aunt America, who she said mistreated her:

My blues came from when I was a baby, because I was an orphan. People I stayed with misused me. I had to eat the crumbs from the bread, juice from the beans, go to school with no decent clothes. And to me, that is the blues. The kids all looking nice, and here I am. The teacher said, 'Where are your shoes.' I said, 'These are all I got.'" And she asked my auntie, who was keeping me, to come to school. And she lied, said, 'She's telling you a tale. We treat her nice.' Teacher said, 'I don't think you do, because I'm looking at her. She comes to school with no lunch, looking like nothing . . .'<sup>159</sup>

Aunt America, who had nine children of her own, became Alberta's childhood nemesis, and the last of her many conflicts with Aunt America came when she was ten years old. It began with America's demand for Alberta to wash a stack of dishes. Alberta refused, thinking the demand unfair since none of the other children were asked. "I said, 'If you come near me, I'm going to kill you.' She called her husband, said, 'Ben come here.'-- My name's Roberta -- Said, 'Roberta talking about trying to kill me,' and I said, 'That's what I'll do.' I just had my little sack on my back. At that time, carfare was six cents on the streetcar. I got on the streetcar, and went back to my Aunt Pearl. That's the one who had first got me."<sup>160</sup>



According to Alberta, living with Aunt Pearl was unsatisfactory, too. She longed to be on her own, on her own terms. By the age of fourteen, she had been picking up side jobs like washing windows to save for her escape. It was at this time that Alberta met her first lover. “I run into this guy, this guy, and, ah, it’s a story,” Alberta said. Consequently, she had a son named James Drayton.<sup>161</sup> The teenager, who did not lack relatives in Detroit, felt alone. “I raised myself. I say I raised me. I just held my head up, and said, ‘I’m going to do it.’ All I had was myself,” Alberta said.<sup>162</sup> Forced to drop out of Miller High School in the tenth grade, Alberta found it tough supporting herself and her child. She paid \$15 a month rent, and began to pick up odd jobs in the neighborhood before she found sporadic work at area nightclubs. She said she might dance a one-nighter at a club, or sing jazz for one night at another. “So I was living at [Alfred and Brush streets] and getting jobs here and there and paying my little rent and food, and that’s the way I just kept on.”<sup>163</sup> Her lifestyle at the time was both an act of desperation and an affirmation to herself that she could live on her own and support herself.

Alberta must also have met and married Billy Adams, the Broadway star of “Hellzapoppin,” in the late 1930s or early 1940s.<sup>164</sup> Adams, who helped Alberta learn to dance, persuaded the owner of Uncle Tom’s Cabin on Eight Mile Road to hire Alberta as a dancer.<sup>165</sup> Thus guided and mentored, Alberta embarked on a career in show business. She says it was more for the love of show business than the love of money. “I loved it all my life. Since I was seventeen, I’ve been in show business. It’s been a long time. So I love it, but some people do it just to get paid and they can’t do nothing.”<sup>166</sup>

Alberta first started performing as a tap dancer and a jazz singer at the age of seventeen, and she soon found herself with a new identity. The first advertisement of her performing career noted in *The Michigan Chronicle* appears in 1939, when she tap-danced at the Midway Club on a

bill that also included a female impersonator and a shake dancer.<sup>167</sup> Three years later, she appears as a singer along with seven other performers at the Club B & C, a “swing club” in Paradise Valley.<sup>168</sup> Alberta said she was singing jazz in the late 1930s at the Royal Blue on Russell Street when club personnel changed her name from Roberta to Alberta. “Yeah, they called me Alberta. They changed my name so fast . . . the people changed it for show business.”<sup>169</sup> Alberta had to fill smaller roles in show business before she became a blues singer. In order to do so, she had to lie about her age. “And then I put my age up. I wanted to be a chorus girl, so I went to a place on Hastings and Vernor Highway, a place called the Rosebud.<sup>170</sup> So I went and told the man that I was 22-years-old, and he said, ‘Ok, you’ve got a job.’” The job disappeared as fast as it materialized when Alberta’s aunt came to the club at two o’ clock in the morning screaming that her niece was a minor.<sup>171</sup> Adams may have won her independence by moving away from her Aunt Pearl, but the two remained close.

In the early 1940s, the Club B&C ranked as one of Paradise Valley’s most popular clubs.<sup>172</sup> As the nightclubs vied for top national and local acts, they sought to take care of their future by grooming local newcomers, who were both less expensive and more accessible than nationally-known headliners. In March 1942, Adams inherited the title of “the Queen of the Blues” while working at the Club B&C. That month, a performer named Marion Abernathy starred at the B&C as “The Queen of the Blues.”<sup>173</sup> According to Ms. Adams, her opportunity to make the switch from dancer to singer came when Abernathy was struck ill. “When this girl taken sick,” she said, “I took her place and the man told me, ‘You got a job singing the blues,’ and I stayed there five years.”<sup>174</sup> Alberta also became the new queen of the blues. *The Michigan Chronicle* also began to bestow upon Alberta the regal title in articles, cut lines and columns,

reinforcing the efforts of the Club B&C to make it known that the “Queen” performed regularly in the club at the corner of St. Antoine and Beacon.<sup>175</sup>

The trajectory of Adams’s success at the Club B&C is apparent in *The Michigan Chronicle*. By mid-1943, she appeared in the newspaper’s column, “For Night Lifers Only,” as the club’s main attraction.<sup>176</sup> In 1944, after the club became a nightspot for “theater bar entertainment,” Adams was distinguished among the cast of the “Swift Black and Tan Revue” as “the Queen of the Blues.”<sup>177</sup> “Theater bar entertainment” meant that floorshows became bigger. “They had a big band,” Adams said. “We had the MC. We had a comedian. We had a tap dancer. We had a blues singer. We had chorus girls . . . and a shake dancer.”<sup>178</sup> Staying for five years at the B&C where she could develop as a singer and corral her own following had its benefits. The Club B&C changed hands in 1945, with new owner Herman Freeman renaming it Club Owen. Still in her twenties, Ms. Adams stayed on and became one of the club’s veteran performers, owing to her long association with the Club B&C. In the *Michigan Chronicle*’s view, Alberta’s long stint at the B&C defined her as a symbol of the club: “Miss Adams is not new to Detroiters. As far back as can be remembered, this sender of blues numbers has been associated with the spot on the corner of Beacon and St. Antoine.”<sup>179</sup> According to the article, patrons demanded that the new owner bring her back to Club Owen when the club changed hands, and he did. “Three months ago, she opened, and has been headlining the review ever since.”<sup>180</sup> The five-year engagement at the Club B&C and the Club Owen established her as an audience favorite and a critically acclaimed local act. By the end of her stay at the nightclub, Alberta had become one of Paradise Valley’s best-known local entertainers.

During her five-year stint at the Club B&C, Alberta enthralled *Michigan Chronicle* writers, who frequently included capsule reviews of her act in their columns. In a 1942 “Detroit

after Dark” column, the author recognized Alberta Adams as a first-rate blues performer: “. . . swingin’, swayin’, playin’ was the thing of the hour when the place rocked, as blues-singer Alberta Adams dug them but groovy-like with ‘Gonna Move.’”<sup>181</sup> In 1943, Larry Chism wrote in “Swingin’ with Nightlifers” that, “Alberta Adams is without a doubt the main attraction . . . she leaves the patrons clamoring for such old favorites as ‘Rocks in My Bed’ and ‘Going Down Slow.’”<sup>182</sup> With “Going Down Slow,” written and first recorded in 1941 by St. Louis Jimmy Oden, Alberta professed a blues that seemed beyond her years. The singer, waiting at death’s door after having devoted herself to a lifetime of “fun” asks a friend to write her mother for forgiveness:

*I have had my fun, if I never get well no more  
I have had my fun, if I never get well no more  
All of my health is failing  
Lord, I’m going down slow  
I’m going down slow.*

*Please write my mother, and tell her the shape I’m in  
Please write my mother, and tell her the shape I’m in  
Tell her to pray for me,  
Forgive me for my sin,  
For all of my sin.<sup>183</sup>*

Alberta Adams performed the blues without pretensions, even in the initial years of her career. She said she qualified at a young age to be a blues singer on both physical and emotional levels. “I can sing a blues because I have lived the blues. I come in the world with the blues. That’s my thing. I know, you got to live the blues.” Sippie Wallace could not have said it better.<sup>184</sup>

When she was making three-dollars a night, Alberta found financial support in men who saw her at the clubs, and, once established as a headliner at the B&C, Alberta made \$25 a night, but she never forgot those three-dollar nights. “It was tight,” she said. “Like I say, your rent wasn’t bad. Then I had a boyfriend. Well, I call them sponsors. A sponsor would help me.

That's how I got over. That old money wasn't nothing."<sup>185</sup> She also had a manager in a man named Chester Rentie, who insisted on taking a percentage of even the smallest of Alberta's earnings. Rentie generally waited outside a club where Alberta played and demanded his ten percent. When she became a headliner at the Club B&C, things changed. "I was getting \$25 a night and you were a star with that kind of money," Alberta said.<sup>186</sup>

Adams said performers at the B&C treated one another cordially offstage, but competed fiercely onstage.<sup>187</sup> Alberta played alongside the best of the blues, jump blues, and early rhythm-and-blues artists at the time, including Big Joe Turner, Louis Jordan, T Bone Walker and Wynonie Harris. Club patrons, given wooden knockers to pound the tables with in order to respond to the entertainers, could get loud in showing their admiration. Adams ran into trouble after she outperformed Wynonie "Mr. Blues" Harris at the Club B&C.<sup>188</sup> Set to do an Indianapolis show with Adams after the two had played together in Detroit, Harris turned down this new opportunity to perform with Adams out of hand. "In those days when you'd outdo somebody [they'd say] 'she burned him,'" Adams said. "They called me to Indianapolis to do a show with him, and he refused. They said, 'What's wrong with her?' He says, 'Nothing's wrong with her. That lady bad, and I'm not going on the show with her.'"<sup>189</sup>

Listening to and watching others, practicing at home, and harboring the belief that the performer had to maintain an appearance more dazzling than that of the customers, Alberta continued to build her showmanship skills. Adams said she stayed wary at all times, especially of other female performers who came to the club. Some of them, Alberta said, kept her on her toes. "I caught them before I went on. I said, 'Wow.' Then I'd get my little book and say 'what am I going to sing.' You'd go up and say, 'Lord have mercy,' but after that first tune, applause would get a little louder."<sup>190</sup> According to Adams, she also possessed a great capacity to please

and hold audiences: “When I hit the stage, everybody just [indicates silence]. It ain’t like they’re talking too loud or they don’t pay me no mind. They’re on me, and I can hold an audience. I got showmanship.”<sup>191</sup>

A tremendous amount of competition also took place backstage for Alberta, who became addicted to gambling early in her career and did not free herself from her addiction until fifty-years later. “I was a junkie gambler. I’d get up gambling, take a bath, put my cap on, OK. Tell me where the gambling’s at,” Alberta said. “My husband, we’d write out like money orders to pay like a house note or light, gas, whatever. . . . I took them into a gambling game . . . I lost everything, car and everything.” She also lost to T Bone Walker, one quarter at a time. “Me and him gambled all night. We played Tonk, for a quarter.<sup>192</sup> I said, ‘Why don’t you raise it.’ He said, ‘Oh, no, no, play it for a quarter, all night.’ I wound up the next morning with no money.”<sup>193</sup> Alberta said that in the late 1990s she finally freed herself of the habit by turning down offers to gamble. “They’d be calling me, ‘Girl, I went out and bought some new shoes. I got me a dining room set, and I’m thinking, that’s my money.’ So I just said, ‘Oh well, I’m not going.’”<sup>194</sup>

Adams is proud that she proved able to drop the habit in the late 1990s, but while she totally avoided being trapped in other vices like alcohol, smoking and drugs, she does not deny that she had a serious problem with gambling that lasted decades. Musicians, like other artists, were known to be in the vanguard of vice, and often sought alternative lifestyles to set them apart from the “normal” or “square” world. The life of a gambler, with its risks and potential conflict with the law, could be just as exciting as other forms of vice, like alcohol, drugs, and sex. Songwriters at the time wrote songs about gambling, just as they wrote songs about drugs, drinking and sex. In her world, Adams was just one of many who found themselves hooked on

gambling.<sup>195</sup> Adams, who neither remembers how she got her start as a gambler nor why it appealed to her so much in the first place said she grew not only to love to gamble but to need to gamble. “I had to play cards,” she said. “I didn’t care where. I was terrible.”<sup>196</sup>

With a great deal of temporal distance from the actual event and from the perspective of someone who did not live in Paradise Valley, Elaine Moon remarks in her 1974 *Detroit Magazine* piece “(The Past Prologue): Paradise Valley” that the 1943 race riot in Detroit permanently changed Paradise Valley’s reputation as the center of nightlife in the city of Detroit.<sup>197</sup> The riot, which lasted for four days near the end of June, left thirty-eight dead, hundreds injured, and cost millions in property damage. Police violence was much more severe in black neighborhoods than in white neighborhoods. Historian B.J. Widick identified two distinct riots in motion during the four days in June. The most violent one was in Paradise Valley, where police reacted severely after some blacks had looted and burned the remaining Jewish businesses. Police killed seventeen blacks over the four-day span. In the aftermath of the riot, *Michigan Chronicle* editor Louis E. Martin wrote that Detroit’s African Americans--even the liberals who believed in improving race relations-- had become “more nationalistic and more chauvinistic and anti-white than ever before.”<sup>198</sup> Following the riot, some whites allegedly became reluctant to go to the Valley clubs and/or police warned them to stay away.<sup>199</sup> The riot not only deterred some whites from coming to Paradise Valley but also apparently caused others to sell their homes in adjacent areas, thereby opening up new central city locations for black residents and businesses.<sup>200</sup> Thus, Detroit’s African-American population, including its nightclubs, was able to move into the city’s near West Side and its North End neighborhoods.

New clubs continued to open in the Valley, such as Sportree’s Music Bar and the Club El Sino, (the latter located above the old Club B&C), but the decline in the Valley’s nightlife scene

shows up in *Michigan Chronicle* columns and in decreasing nightclub advertisements in the newspaper.<sup>201</sup> Following World War Two, a *Chronicle* writer in 1946 proclaimed that Paradise Valley was “jumping” on the night before his report. “Most of the spots were ready to hang up the SRO [standing room only] sign,” he wrote.<sup>202</sup> In July, the paper’s weekly column, “Swinging with Nightlifers,” indicated a slump by stating, “Word comes that the Valley may soon boom again.”<sup>203</sup> As if in affirmation, a 1949 listing of clubs in a column in *The Michigan Chronicle* listed only six of eighteen nightclubs with locations in Paradise Valley. Evidently, the postwar boom did not last, and that was understandable since business people anticipated slum clearance in the area.<sup>204</sup>

*Chronicle* writers described Alberta as the “Queen,” “the Delineator,” “a Swinger” and “a Sender” of the blues, and the “Queen of Jump.” By the end of the decade, the newspaper had also described her as a “crowd pleaser” and “the number one singer in the city.”<sup>205</sup> The adulation meant that the newspaper, club owners, and interested observers in Detroit viewed Alberta as an outstanding performer and saw her as among the best of the city’s female blues singers. Dinah Washington, the nation’s “Queen of the Blues” and a frequent visitor to Detroit, may have momentarily superseded Adams when she spent time in Detroit. However, Alberta wore the crown at the local level and beyond by winning accolades from local show people and show people like the Apollo Theater’s Frank Shiffman, who also christened her the queen of the blues after a performance at the Apollo.<sup>206</sup> Continued emphasis and repetitive mentions from the newspaper lent Alberta extra credibility. It is also noteworthy that later on in her career *The Michigan Chronicle* repeatedly cast Adams into the mold of the city’s blues queen despite club promoters’ efforts to change the distinction to one more modern when new musical trends emerged in the mid-1950s.



Having paid considerable attention to Alberta numerous times throughout the 1940s, the weekly newspaper continued to be a powerful booster for Adams into the 1950s. In 1948, Adams completed a four-month engagement at the Bizerte Bar. Billed as “The Queen of the Blues,” she started to earn paragraphs rather than sentences in *The Michigan Chronicle*.<sup>207</sup> In a feature article titled, “The Favorite Blues Woman: Alberta Adams Waiting for a Break,” journalist and music writer Roy Stephens predicted that with proper backing, encouragement and the release of a few phonograph records, she “[could] easily become the next Detroit artist to smash her way into the select circle of nationally known warblers.”<sup>208</sup> The newspaper listed a lengthy resume of places Ms. Adams had already been, as well as one of her greatest thrills--singing with Duke Ellington.<sup>209</sup> It appears that “Detroit’s Queen of the Blues” maintained her title and her status as a headliner with a combination of talent and self-promotion, the willingness of night club promoters to consistently use the title, and with quite a bit of help from *The Michigan Chronicle*.

In the life of a professional musician, travel becomes a necessity if one desires to keep working throughout the entire year, and while Alberta Adams generally shied away from travel, she eventually succumbed to the rigorous, and sometimes dangerous, lifestyle of a traveling musician. If the issue of race seldom came up for Alberta Adams while she was in Detroit, she was awakened when she agreed in the late 1950s to tour the southern states. At the time, blacks living in and traveling through the South needed to be keenly aware in the segregated states. African Americans endured separate bathrooms, separate drinking fountains, and very little, if any, hospitable treatment from whites. There was difficulty in finding lodging, getting around exclusion from stores, and evading southern police, who seemingly could turn almost anything an African American did into a crime or at least a reason for harassment. Ruth Brown, the

rhythm-and-blues singer known as “Miss Rhythm,” said touring the postwar South forced musicians to learn “the art of survival.” That could mean getting used to relieving themselves near the sides of the roads, learning to cook on hotplates in motel rooms, and getting used to having to send white drivers or blacks who could pass for white into stores for needed items. Brown, from Portsmouth, Virginia, said she was not used to the quasi-apartheid conditions of the deep South, and that she often expended a great deal of effort to maintain herself in situations where losing her temper could have caused serious conflict, arrest, or imprisonment.<sup>210</sup> Alberta Adams, raised in Detroit, where race-relations were undeniably tense but not codified, was shocked at the way some southerners treated her. Sometimes she reacted.

One offstage incident she recounted took place at a five-and-dime store in Nashville, where a white woman refused to wait on her:

She said, ‘We don’t serve niggers here.’ My aunt used to tell me, she said. ‘If you’re going down South, please behave yourself.’ I said, ‘If they call me by that name, I’m going to jump on them.’ So anyway, I said, ‘Come here.’ I said, ‘What did you say?’ ‘We don’t serve niggers here’ and when she said that: BLAM, I hit her. I seen the blood running. I grabbed my coat, I said, ‘You’re the nigger, don’t call me that.’ . . . I went outside and I got the Yellow Cab, went home, locked all the doors, put all the windows down, saying, ‘They’re going to kill me. They’re going to kill me.’<sup>211</sup>

According to Alberta, a very real sense of danger filled her when she traveled in the South. Naïve and uncomfortable in the strange, southern environment, she dreaded the out-of-town engagements that agents and managers convinced her were necessary to further her career. “It was dangerous,” Ms. Adams said.<sup>212</sup>

Going to Houston, Texas, about three in the morning. Everybody’s hungry. We’d come off a gig. Everybody got money. We seen a colored guy standing on the corner. We said, ‘Hey man, where can we eat around here.’ He said, ‘C’mon, I’ll show you.’ He had his car and we followed him through the alley, and when we got there, everybody sit down, everybody order steaks and everybody got they money. So me, I wanted a bologna sandwich as usual. I said, ‘Now I’m going to

be different,' I said, 'get me some steak and gravy.' When she comes back, she has white gravy and I said, 'I don't eat white gravy,' and she said, '[w]e don't serve the other kind.' I took the whole platter and 'bam' over to where she was standing at. The rest of them said, 'You're going to get us killed.' I said, 'I don't care, this is sickening.'<sup>213</sup>

Racial issues in the South, such as structural racism, extreme racial inequality, and inordinately distributed poverty, were not supposed to exist in the enlightened North, but they did, along with urban decay, which, in many old, industrial cities like Detroit had become visible before the turn of the twentieth century. For much of that century, Detroit nursed an acute housing crisis, which was in large part relieved in the postwar era by large-scale white-flight to the suburbs.<sup>214</sup> Arguably, race relations in Detroit had not improved since 1943's tragic racial catastrophe. The two 1950s city administrations, the first under Mayor Albert Cobo and the second under Mayor Louis Miriani, proved unreceptive to African American and white liberal demands to relieve the housing shortage through public housing—some of it integrated. Adequate public housing could have allowed many black Detroiters to escape the “decaying” Paradise Valley and Black Bottom areas before the slum clearance project brought about their demolition.<sup>215</sup> Miriani particularly fell out of favor with blacks when he called for a police crackdown in black neighborhoods. It essentially pitted the nearly all-white Detroit police force against the city's black population and resulted in mass arrests, beatings and “legally questionable detentions” of African Americans.<sup>216</sup> Detroiters could see a racial crisis like that of 1943 coming for many years before July 1967, when the African American insurrection, or rebellion, occurred. For some, the term riot did not adequately describe the uprising, which left 41 dead and 347 injured, caused up to five-hundred-million dollars in property damage, and became “the bloodiest uprising in a half century.”<sup>217</sup>

Located outside of Paradise Valley and owned for the most part by Jewish Americans, two new and very popular clubs, the Flame and the 20 Grand, which opened around 1950, the year that the slum clearance project actually got underway. In effect, their appearance on Detroit's music scene signaled that Paradise Valley would no longer be the city's premier African American entertainment center. In 1949, advertisements appeared for Morris Wasserman's Flame Show Bar located outside of the Valley district at John R and Canfield. Almost immediately, Wasserman brought in such top-flight attractions as Billie Holiday and Dinah Washington. "That was the hottest spot," Alberta said.<sup>218</sup> In 1953, partners Bill Kabbush and Marty Eisner opened the 20 Grand Recreation Center at Fourteenth Street and West Warren<sup>219</sup> Both clubs presented full floorshows comprised of a headliner and four supporting acts, and both initially debuted as glitzy, adult night clubs that catered to African Americans.<sup>220</sup>

The clubs booked big names from the national scene and certainly cut into the profits of some of the remaining black-owned clubs, but Jewish ownership of nightclubs, record companies and many business enterprises related to music was quite common in the music industry. As Nelson George writes in his *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, African Americans were not the only American ethnic group subject to discrimination and exclusion. Shunned by Wall Street, Jewish businessmen looked at the music industry as a business that presented few obstacles to Jewish entrepreneurship. "They often turned to black neighborhoods—in some ways paralleling blacks' discovery that their avenues for advancement were less barricaded in the world of entertainment."<sup>221</sup> The Valley's established clubs began to change hands frequently during this period, and at least one club received a tremendous amount of attention from the Detroit police.<sup>222</sup> For years, the Flame and the 20 Grand presented African-American talent almost exclusively, and both clubs frequently booked Alberta Adams. The 20 Grand especially, with its

small room, the Driftwood Lounge, and bowling, represented a new kind of night club that offered variety not only in music, but in its options for other leisure activities.

Another bid for Adams's services occurred one night at the Flame when Chess artists and repertoire man Dave Mathews stopped by on a scouting mission and offered Adams an opportunity to record for the Chicago-based independent label. "I said, yeah, OK, but you hear that stuff so much I didn't pay it no mind and I went back in the dressing room," Alberta said. "They sent for me again . . . I said, 'Aw, well, OK.' I recorded the next day." Adams recorded four sides for the label at Detroit's United Sound Studios with the Red Saunders Orchestra, brought in by Chess from Chicago, expressly to back up Alberta. The songs included "Messin' Around with the Blues" and "This Morning," both released together as a single in October 1953.<sup>223</sup> The other two songs, "Remember" and "No Good Man," remained unreleased until 1992, when the 1992 Chess Blues box set contained "Remember," a song originally composed by Leroy Carr as "Six Feet of Cold Ground" with additional verses written by Adams.<sup>224</sup> "No Good Man" remains unreleased. Ambivalent when she agreed to the recording session and record contract, Adams was ultimately disappointed. "I've always heard a lot of stuff about we're going to do that and I didn't believe none of them, but I recorded with Chess and didn't get a dime, a nickel, not a penny," she said.<sup>225</sup>

With the first line of every verse repeating in the traditional the call-and-response manner of African music, a cakewalk cadence, a melody reminiscent of "St. Louis Blues," Alberta Adams's "Remember," recorded in 1953 and released on Chicago's Chess label, references blues music of previous decades and, through Alberta's interpretation, falls within the tradition of women's blues. The song incorporates the wailing cries of a muted trumpet, and a very bluesy piano reminiscent of the instrumental backing of the 1920's blues queens,

“Remember” stays within the parameters of what by then had become a traditional blues, yet swings ever so slightly. It could be another deathbed song, or even a suicide note that urges the singer’s lover to remember her, when she is in “six feet of cold, cold ground.”

*Remember me baby, when I’m in six feet of cold, cold ground  
Remember me baby, when I’m in six feet of cold, cold ground  
I’m just another good girl who loved you  
Just another good girl gone down*

*Don’t cry baby  
Please don’t cry after I’m gone  
Don’t cry baby  
Please don’t cry after I’m gone  
I’m just another good girl who loved you  
And I didn’t do anything wrong*

*Please remember me baby  
And all the love that we once knew  
Please remember me baby  
And all the love that we once knew  
Well I know we had some bad times  
But there were some good ones, too*

*If you say you love me baby  
And really mean it true  
If you say you love me baby  
And really mean it true  
Everything I do in life  
I’ll do it just for you<sup>226</sup>*

Songwriting was another element of Adams’s repertoire, and, like the blues queens of the 1920s, she believed that a song must tell a story in order to be effective. “Like I tell everybody, the blues tells a story,” Alberta said.<sup>227</sup> She said her own stories, with titles like, “I Was Born with the Blues,” “Say Baby Say,” “I’m So Tired of Being Alone,” often came to her in the night. “I might be laying down and something comes to me. I jump up and jot it down,” Alberta said. “Then when I get up, I look at it, then I try and arrange it. There’s got to be a story behind it,

because all tunes are supposed to have a story behind them.”<sup>228</sup> With her songwriting, Adams tried to translate troubles and tribulations she went through in her personal life into something that would entertain and elicit empathy from a wider audience, and also wrote upbeat songs that fit easily into the upbeat mood of jump blues and rhythm-and-blues.

As if in response to the *Chronicle's* feature article titled “Show business may be in Detroit, But What Happened to the Spirit,” Alberta Adams reinvented herself in 1953 as one half of the Bluzettes.<sup>229</sup> Her Bluzettes partner, Chubby Newsom, a god sister and an old gambling partner known as “The Blues Bombshell,” performed regularly at the Flame. The two shared the stage at the Flame the week of June 6, 1953.<sup>230</sup> Adams later invited Newsom onstage with her while she performed at the Crystal Lounge, a club on Detroit’s West Side that billed itself in 1955 as the “Westside’s Most Beautiful Black and Tan.”<sup>231</sup> The duo played a succession of Detroit clubs and quickly became a success.<sup>232</sup> “We was bad, baby. We wore the same things. It looked like it was one person. . . .Our behinds went the same way. Our heads went the same way. We were really bad,” Alberta said.<sup>233</sup> In an article on the Bluzettes that included sample lyrics and colorful descriptions of the duo’s scintillating stage show, the *Chronicle* concurred. Prior to the article’s publication in August of 1955, the Bluzettes took their show on the road to the Midwest and the Northeast, and the article’s author stated that the group’s travels represented the first time that Alberta Adams “stepped into the spotlight with a ‘big name’ band behind her.” Tiny Bradshaw’s big band backed the Bluzettes, and the writer skipped over the fact that Alberta had previously performed with many big name bands, including Duke Ellington’s, T. J. Fowler’s and Maurice King’s.

The Bluzettes, steeped in blues and early rhythm-and-blues, later toured throughout the New England states, and played the Crown-Propeller in Chicago and Harlem’s Apollo Theater,

which Adams says was an exciting, but exhausting experience.<sup>234</sup> “It sounds big to say the Apollo, but woo, all them shows every day. About five or six a day everyday, you know. I mean the name was big, but doing all that work.”<sup>235</sup> In Detroit, many clubs stayed open seven nights a week and expected three shows a night from performers, which Adams said could get wearing. “I don’t like that, every night. Well, then, Lee’s Sensation was every night. At the Flame, it was seven nights. And at the Frolic, it was seven nights.”<sup>236</sup> Demand for the Bluzettes in Detroit from 1953 to 1955 required more time than Alberta would have liked to work. In 1955, the duo performed many out-of-town dates and played for thirteen solid weeks at various Detroit clubs.<sup>237</sup> Newsom, who had warned Alberta of an illness when the Bluzettes began, told Adams in 1956 that she was sick and unable to go on.<sup>238</sup> Although labor is not often associated with entertainment, the work behind entertaining, including travel, rehearsal, and nightly, multiple shows, could be exhausting, and both Newsom and Adams agreed to retire the Bluzettes after “grinding it out” for two years.

Working from the blueprint laid out by the 1920s blues queens and the vaudeville she was brought up on, Alberta insisted on including comedy as part of her onstage persona as a solo artist in the Bluzettes. She used humor that particularly targeted men in the audience to both explore male-female relationships and establish control in her performances. In the duo, Alberta played the role of the clown and she maintained that comedy had long been part of her concept of good showmanship. “I have done shows with no singing at all, with just talking, for the whole show, and had them in stitches,” Adams said.<sup>239</sup> Alberta’s comedy, which often juxtaposed the sexes in a playful yet stinging way, became an important part of her act. She believed that communication between audience and performer was essential in show business, and she felt a show was more enjoyable for both herself and her audience with the occasional back-and-forth.



“I like that, and they like it,” Alberta says. “The people that come out want to really be seen and they enjoy you talking back with them and what not. I’ll ask, ‘is that your wife you’re with?’ Or, ‘I know that’s not your wife, that’s your girlfriend, your wife will wonder where you’re at.’ It’s just a little thing, you know.”<sup>240</sup> Ms. Adams admits that she victimized men in the audience. “. . . [t]he men always say, ‘Alberta, why do you always talk about us men? There are all these women out there, why do you always talk about us men?’ It be to humiliate them good,” Alberta said.

Through her comedy and its seemingly innocent motive of humiliating men for laughs, Adams engaged herself in an indirect form of social protest that overtly contested male-female relationships.<sup>241</sup> She may also have been using the stage as sort of a shield behind her efforts to turn the tables on male dominance. In attacking male supremacy through the guise of comedy, Alberta posed no direct threats and sexual jabs were likely written off as all for laughs. Adams was able to put forth a show of power over men that other women could emulate. In making fools of men, Alberta indirectly protested their dominance over women and provided a spirited lift for women in the room. Putting men in their place had by then become a traditional feature of a blues woman’s show, both as a comedic staple and in songs, which often deflated men and/or bestowed upon women almost supernatural powers.<sup>242</sup> To stand sexual relations on their head was one of the freedoms of the blues women, who voiced their rebellion in multiple ways, including their thinly veiled use of comedy.

Apparently, local promoters and club owners felt that few acts could succeed without an association with rock-and-roll. Alberta Adams, who at that moment in time, appeared once at the 20 Grand billed as “Detroit’s Rock and Roll Bombshell,” was also a temporary victim of the craze.<sup>243</sup> In 1955-1956, a plethora of advertisements for rock-and-roll and new rhythm-and-blues

acts hit the entertainment pages of *The Michigan Chronicle*, including advertisements for local artists Andre Williams and the Five Dollars, Little Willie John, and Nolan Strong and the Diablos.<sup>244</sup> National rock-and-roll and rhythm-and-blues acts, such as Elvis Presley, who first appeared at the Fox Theater, and Chuck Berry, who played Detroit's Graystone Ballroom. Smaller acts, such as rhythm-and-blues doo-wop groups like the Ravens and the Orioles, were booked into Detroit's premier nightclubs, the Flame and the 20 Grand. Other nightclubs advertised events like "The Rock and Roll Cocktail Revue," which was held at Club Rendezvous. Even John Lee Hooker, otherwise known as a blues singer, could not escape the taint of rock-and-roll. The Club Basin Street advertised that "Johnny Lee Hooker and his Boogie Ramblers ha[d] an all-star rock and roll show."<sup>245</sup>

In the raging whirlwind of rock-and-roll and rhythm-and-blues, the blues had become passé and irrelevant, even embarrassing, to some younger African Americans: "As a kid in the 1950s," Stax recording artist Isaac Hayes told *Nowhere to Run* author Gerri Hirshey, "I was taught to be ashamed of the blues. We thought of it as plantation darkie stuff. And that was miles from where we wanted to be."<sup>246</sup> Nelson George, who notes that young blacks at the time deemed the blues not only shameful, but also depressing, backward, and accommodating to white values, said he drew the line at the argument that the blues was irrelevant, but conceded that many blacks actually felt that way. He concluded that African Americans also disposed of many other forms of music, including swing, doo-wop, and ultimately rock-and-roll, which, like the blues, all became "history to blacks."<sup>247</sup> Amiri Baraka saw rock-and-roll as a commercialized dilution of blues-based rhythm-and-blues, and he identified the blues elements present at the time in jazz. Baraka wrote that only be-boppers, who from the 1940s through the 1960s played in relative obscurity in comparison to the rhythm-and-blues and rock-and-roll

players, truly paid homage to blue music. According to Baraka, the be-boppers relied heavily on blues melodies and blues forms to create their particular brand of jazz and restored “the hegemony of the blues as the most important basic form of Afro-American music” in the process.<sup>248</sup> However, according to Baraka, the blues itself never regained its one-time popularity. Since it required neither the middlebrow proclivities of many jazz fans nor the highbrow tastes of classical music devotees, Baraka named rock-and-roll as the “blues form” of the masses.<sup>249</sup>

As if to fill a vacuum, white admirers of the blues became much more plentiful when many African Americans turned away from the music and, in the process, shed part of their culture.<sup>250</sup> However, as Hayes points out, the desire on the part of some African Americans was not to preserve that culture, but to try to forget it. African American poet and music historian A.B. Spellman’s rebuttal to white critics of be-bop, who named themselves as conservators of the blues, must have hit home for many blacks. While not wishing to be closely associated with the blues, some blacks nonetheless may have felt a sense of pride associated with the development of the blues into an African American art form and sustained a proprietary interest in blues music. Spellman’s question was short and to the point: “Who are these ofays [whites] who’ve appointed themselves guardians of last year’s blues?”<sup>251</sup>

Aware that the African American blues audience was changing and diminishing in the face of the faster and livelier new rhythm-and-blues and rock-and-roll, club promoters attempted to repackage Alberta for the new, younger audiences. With the end of the Bluzettes, Adams was back as a single, opening for rhythm-and-blues newcomers Andre Williams and the Five Dollars at the 20 Grand.<sup>252</sup> Keeping with the times, the 20 Grand billed her as “Detroit’s Rhythm and Blues Bombshell.”<sup>253</sup> When she came back to the 20 Grand in 1957, the club touted Adams once

more as “Detroit’s Rock and Roll Bombshell.”<sup>254</sup> Alberta made it through the first onslaught of rock and roll without altering what she had been doing all along. As she said, “It’s nothing but the blues, that’s how I put it. I got my own style and can’t nobody do what I do. I don’t try to copy off nobody.”<sup>255</sup> In its May 12, 1956, edition, the *Michigan Chronicle* ran a large photo of Adams over a cut line hailing her once more as “Detroit’s Queen of the Blues” and a “stellar attraction.” Editors situated a 20 Grand advertisement billing her as “Detroit’s Rhythm and Blues Bombshell” cattycorner to their own interpretation of Alberta. *The Chronicle*, true to Alberta’s blues origins, refused to alter her royal title in the city of Detroit. She remained “Detroit’s Queen of the Blues” despite the rhythm-and-blues and rock-and-roll craze. In this case, the newspaper chose to represent the established traditions of the blues rather than attach itself to what many considered at the time to be a fad.

Even with Paradise Valley fading, Alberta Adams, a product of the music scene that developed in the Valley, stood at the height of her career. Having signed in 1957 with Detroit booking agent and theatrical manager Rollo Vest, Adams had reluctantly agreed to take her talent south on an extensive southern tour.<sup>256</sup> Vest signed Adams following 1956, a banner year for Alberta in which she completed twenty-four week-long engagements in Detroit nightclubs such as the 20 Grand, the Club Gay 90s, Lee’s Sensation, and the Alvito Bar.”<sup>257</sup> Alberta’s hesitance to travel was well known, but her popularity in Detroit also increased her value on the national market, and managers and booking agents convinced her that she was obligated to travel. In 1957, *The Michigan Chronicle* ran an article carrying the headline, “Blues Queen Signs With Rollo West [sic].” The writer of the brief article made it a point to bring up Alberta’s reluctance to travel by stating, “This time she does have a reason. She has been in such demand in the immediate Detroit area that she has had no opportunity to be booked in other sections.”<sup>258</sup>

It is not difficult to understand Alberta's reluctance to take her act south. For decades, black entertainers from the North, who were not accustomed to the peculiar type of segregation laws in place in the southern states, had to contend with the discomfort and danger that traveling the South often entailed, and many of them, such as Ella Fitzgerald, eventually deferred from touring the South altogether.<sup>259</sup> In the 1950s, the South became even more dangerous for traveling musicians as southern white supremacists reacted--often violently--to the threat of rhythm-and-blues and rock-and-roll music, both of which threatened the southern way of segregated life and ultimately, white supremacy itself. In 1956, Elvis, the bane of many southern white supremacists, exploded onto the American music scene, but 1956 was also the year that several white men from the Birmingham, Alabama, Citizen's Council violently attacked Alabama-native Nat King Cole while he was onstage in front of an integrated orchestra playing to an all-white audience.<sup>260</sup> Even if she played black venues only, Adams had to travel from place to place and from city to city, putting up with segregated and often substandard lodging and bathroom facilities, and even finding it difficult to get a decent meal. As a black woman, she was a potential victim of sexual violence, incidents of which occurred with alarming frequency.<sup>261</sup>

The previous year, In 1956, Alberta's popularity in Detroit did not wane with the end of the Bluzettes as she worked twenty-four full weeks that year, primarily at the 20 Grand. Onstage she competed with local rhythm-and-blues and rock-and roll-sensations.<sup>262</sup> The article went on to quote Alberta's new manager, Rollo Vest, who said he had a difficult time convincing "Detroit's Queen of the Blues" to travel. He finally convinced her by saying, "Look Alberta, if Queen Elizabeth can come all the way from England to tour the United States, certainly you as 'the queen of the blues' can do it since you're already here."<sup>263</sup> In retrospect, Alberta viewed signing with Rollo Vest – or any booking agent or manager she had during these years – as a

failed venture, and she seemed to have forgotten his role in convincing her to tour the South. “There wasn’t much he could do to help me with,” Alberta said. “He might have sent me to Cincinnati or Philadelphia, and he sent me to Chicago one time, but you know he really didn’t do too much for me.”<sup>264</sup>

A 1958 advertisement for the Club El Sino in *The Michigan Chronicle* invited readers to “have fun every night in the Valley,” but the Valley, in the face of its impending demolition, did not likely have very much fun left in it. In 1945, city officials from Mayor Edward Jeffries administration identified Paradise Valley as part of a larger slum clearance project that, save for a few streets here and there, would remove the predominantly African American districts of Paradise Valley and Black Bottom from the map of Detroit. Although the process of what some call “negro removal” took more than fifteen years to complete, both businesses and residents began to evacuate the areas long before the appearance of the wrecking ball. Consequently, most of the seventeen black-owned nightclubs that served the area around 1940 had during the 1950s closed their doors, or attempted to move to new locations.<sup>265</sup> In addition, the traditional floorshows that had thrived in Detroit for decades changed dramatically. Alberta’s role as an entertainer on the nightclub scene had changed as well. In the *Michigan Chronicle*, a weekly average of four nightclub advertisements featured floorshows over a thirty-week period in 1958.<sup>266</sup> Throughout 1959, an average of three nightclubs with floorshows advertised each week.<sup>267</sup> Although this is an inaccurate gauge since many clubs may have advertised sporadically, and others may not have advertised at all, it does indicate a decline in the show bar category. In 1958, only the Flame, the 20 Grand, the Alvito Bar, and Lee’s Sensation consistently presented the traditional floorshow made up of a headlining singer, a shake dancer, and two other vocalists, which had become the hallmark of Paradise Valley nightlife. Some

clubs advertised a “traditional floor show” as though it were something out of the ordinary.<sup>268</sup> As the traditional floorshow became more and more outdated, exotic shake dancers like Detroit favorite Lottie the Body began to headline clubs like the 20 Grand.<sup>269</sup> Near the turn of the decade, and with few exceptions, the Detroit nightclubs that featured African American talent would close down, shift format, or reduce the number of acts in their floorshows.

That Alberta Adams retained her status as a blues woman through this era of change and fitted into these new formats is a testament to her expertise in the entertainment field, her lasting appeal to audiences, and the enduring qualities of the blues, which many African Americans still appreciated. At the turn of the decade, Adams, still an African American artist working in a predominantly African American market, survived as a blues artist and remained a headliner in Detroit and in other parts of the country. Noteworthy also are the efforts of the nightclubs to associate Alberta with the blues in advertisements. This restoration of Adams to her blues crown occurred in the early 1960s, when the 1960 congressional hearings on payola (illicitly paying money to disc jockeys in return for airplay) combined with the religious, moral and often racist backlash that had brewed for several years against rock-and-roll and rhythm-and-blues, temporarily quashed many performers.<sup>270</sup> A 1961 ad for the newly opened Phelp’s lounge in the city’s North End read, “Our star attraction . . . she walks, talks and swings the blues.”<sup>271</sup> In 1961, another new club called the Fabulous Rage Show Bar on Davison included in its advertisement: “She sings the blues with jump and zing.”<sup>272</sup> For twenty years, Alberta Adams had retained the title of “Detroit’s Queen of the Blues” and in the early 1960s, Adams proved that there was still room for a queen of the blues in Detroit, despite the onslaught of rock-and-roll and rhythm-and-blues, and the changes in night club format.

In 1959, Alberta bought a house for the first time. The house, on Broad Street on Detroit's near west side, was located west of 12<sup>th</sup> Street, the street that once divided black and white residents. That year, Adams supported a household containing two children, her Aunt Pearl, and her mother. Her mother reentered her life in the early 1950s and Alberta said she had no bad feelings about taking her in. "No, no, no, no, I just took care of her," Alberta said. Alberta said she bought the home in order to better take care of her mother and aunt. Alberta initially moved into a predominantly white area, but the racial makeup of the neighborhood changed within a year. "Across 12<sup>th</sup> Street was all white, because when I moved over there, where I'm at now, it was white on this side, white on this side and white across the street," Alberta said. "I woke up the next summer, or whatever it was, I look around, 'Where is everybody?' It was colored."<sup>273</sup>

Fundamentally, Alberta Adams, like her brand of the blues, did not undergo a radical change in her presentation at any point in her career, with the possible exception of her time with the Bluzettes. During this period, Alberta Adams remained a blues entertainer in the nightclubs of Detroit. She fitted in well with the nightclubs' practice of presenting a variety-filled handful of acts performing in a traditional floorshow. After all, with their variety, they were but one-step away from the vaudeville theaters that preceded them. They were the theaters that had first enthralled Alberta as a young girl, and were home to the 1920s blues queens. Most of the theaters were gone, but Detroit's queen of the blues, and the blues, remained in Detroit.

By the 1960s, Alberta had become part of the package tours emblematic of rock-and-roll and rhythm-and-blues, playing one-night- or short-engagements at venues across the country. What had changed from the past for Alberta were the lengths of her engagements and the decreasing variety included in the floorshow, which increasingly included only musical artists.



In Atlanta, while appearing with the Coasters, Jackie Wilson, Linda Washington, and the Choker Campbell Band at the Peacock Club, she moved up on the bill with a single stellar performance:

The Coasters was hot, ‘Yackety Yak, Don’t Talk Back,’ you know, and they’re getting all that big money. I’m getting \$200, down from Detroit, and they’re getting thousands. Like I say, I was neat. I had on a green dress, green shoes with rhinestones on, and my hair? I was together. So in the dressing room, I could hear them talking, ‘what’s she going to do, what’s she going to do? Is she from Detroit? They were talking about me big time, you know.’<sup>274</sup>

Alberta said the talk intimidated her until bandleader Choker Campbell offered some words of encouragement before the band struck up a tune, and Campbell’s encouragement was enough to motivate Alberta:

And I went out there and they applauded, and he’s standing right behind me saying ‘Sing! Sing! . . . And they went into it, and baby, those stairs at the Peacock . . . I went into ‘Every Day I Have the Blues.’ . . . I walked offstage, all the way outside! I was out there on Auburn Avenue singing ‘Every Day’ and the band was still blowing. . . I tore that place up<sup>275</sup>

That bit of spontaneity not only caught the audience’s attention, Alberta said. It also caught the attention of the other performers and the club manager, who demanded changes in the bill. Suddenly, Alberta was second to the headlining Coasters.

I said, ‘I’m way up there?’ They said, ‘Yes ma’am.’ He said, ‘You bad. You’re a bad little girl.’ He said, ‘You’re from Detroit?’ I said, ‘Yes, sir.’<sup>276</sup>

Directly informed by stage appearances of the blues queens as a youngster, and obtaining in her formative years an informal education in performance and showmanship through vaudeville, which she translated to the nightclub floorshow in her first two decades in show business, Adams shared a great deal with the blues queens of the 1920s. Her songs, which focused on love and sexuality, and her defining the blues in terms of freedom, as well as her proclivity to chip away at male superiority through her humor, were all features of her stage

persona that connected her to blues queens such as Sippie Wallace, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith. However, like the 1920s blues queens, who updated “country” blues by applying urban musicianship and placing their songs in both a “country” and an “urban” context, which seemed required at the time, owing to the rural and urban components of the Great Migration, Alberta’s accelerated “urban” blues also looked to the future.

In the early 1940s, massive migration again inundated industrial cities like Detroit, the Arsenal for Democracy, and Adams, who began her career as a jazz singer, continued to pull lyrical themes out of love, sexuality, and human relationships, but delivered them in new forms of the blues. In part because of its fraternal relationship with jazz, musicians revved up the blues during the war years and sprouted both the faster, swinging rhythms of jump blues and early rhythm-and-blues, two blues-based genres that until the 1950s were quite similar. This new blues was not the same as “country” blues or “classic” blues. It “could be up-tempo and joyous as well as slow and mournful.”<sup>277</sup> It could be nonsensical yet hip, like Lionel Hampton’s “Hey-Ba-Ba-Re-bop.” Her blues had one foot in the past and another directed toward the future. Like the blues queens of the 1920s, Adams became a “cultural conservator” and a “cultural innovator.”

Like the strange, urban environments of Chicago and New York that many of the 1920s female recording stars discovered as migrants, Adams’s wartime Detroit became a another site for exploration and musical innovation. With the incoming rush of war workers, the recent birth of large-scale industrial unionization, the housing crisis, the often volatile racial clashes, and the resultant pressures on the city and its citizens, wartime Detroit was not the same city as prewar Detroit. Alberta Adams discovered this Detroit environment as a young woman. Having long before asserted her independence, Adams, as a nightclub singer in Detroit’s black-and-tans,

traversed back and forth between the social constructs of race, class, and gender until the Chrysler Freeway, and not housing, replaced the entertainment and commercial district known as Paradise Valley, the local matrix that, in many ways, had served to form her.

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<sup>138</sup> The terms “cultural conservators” and “cultural innovators,” which Nadine George-Graves, applies to vaudeville’s Whitman Sisters, describe nearly perfectly the functions of the 1920s blues women. Nadine George-Graves, *The Royalty of Negro Vaudeville: The Whitman Sisters and the Negotiation of Race, Gender and Class in African American Theater, 1900-1940* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 28.

<sup>139</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon, 1998), 168.

<sup>140</sup> These conditions were present to some extent in the 1920s when the blues queens dominated the world of the blues, but, it should be kept in mind that Davis appears to be taking into consideration the entire body of Holiday’s work, which began in 1933 and stopped with her death in 1959. That period was part of continued migration north that is sometimes called the Second Great Migration. Class promotion and stratification, the perceived need for African Americans to assimilate, and intransigent racism were all present in this historical period. Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 171.

<sup>141</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 171.

<sup>142</sup> Billie Holiday, “Billie’s Blues,” *Billie Holiday: The Legacy*, Columbia/Legacy 47724.

<sup>143</sup> Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby, eds., *African American Music: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 522.

<sup>144</sup> Claire F. Fox, “The Portable Border: Site Specificity, Art, and the U.S. – Mexico Frontier,” *Social Text*, no 41 (Winter 1994): 61.

<sup>145</sup> *Detroit Free Press*, 27 October 1938.

<sup>146</sup> Elaine Moon, “(The Past Prologue) Paradise Valley,” *Detroit*, May/June 1974, 16.

<sup>147</sup> *Detroit Free Press*, 30 September 1975. Again, Moon defines Black Bottom as a much larger area, with Woodward as its western border and Chene street bordering the district on the east. Moon, “Paradise Valley,” 16.

<sup>148</sup> *The Detroit News*, 4 May 1938.

<sup>149</sup> Moon, “Paradise Valley,” 13-21.

<sup>150</sup> Keith Owens, “Hastings Street Breakdown: The History of Detroit Blues from Black Bottom to Belle Isle,” *Metro Times* (Detroit) July 26 – August 1, 2000, 18-24.

<sup>151</sup> On 11 Feb. 1956, *The Michigan Chronicle* contained an advertisement for Rip’s Little Club, “Detroit’s most intimate black and tan. *Michigan Chronicle*, 11 February 1956.

<sup>152</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 26 January 1946.

<sup>153</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 25 November 1944.

<sup>154</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 30 September 1939.

<sup>155</sup> The four Whitman Sisters became known as the “royalty of Negro vaudeville,” and were dancers, actresses, comics, and singers, like many other vaudeville stars. Two of the sisters began performing at churches as a teenage duo around the turn of the twentieth century. With the later addition of two younger sisters, the Whitman Sisters became one of the most successful and longest-lasting vaudeville troupes on the black circuit. According to Nadine George-Graves, “The Whitman Sisters functioned as both cultural conservators, passing tradition to a younger generation, as well as cultural innovators, creating repertoires that influence future theater and dance.” In her study of the Whitman Sisters, George-Graves also describes Butterbeans and Susie (Jodie Edwards and Susie Edwards) as a couple who perfected husband-wife skits and characters “while with the Whitman Sisters.” She further describes them as resembling in content and style the *Amos and Andy* radio show of the late 1920s, and Ralph and Alice Kramden from the 1950s television series, *The Honeymooners*. “Susie sang the blues and cakewalked, and Butterbeans performed the Itch, also known as the Heebie Jeebies, in which he scratched himself in syncopation.” George-Graves, *The Royalty of Negro Vaudeville*, 28, 44.

<sup>156</sup> Alberta Adams, interview by author, transcript, Detroit, Michigan, 8 April 2008, 3.

<sup>157</sup> Adams interview, 8 April 2008, 4.

<sup>158</sup> Adams interview, April 8 2008, 3-4.

<sup>159</sup> Alberta Adams, interview by author, transcript, Detroit, Michigan, 26 June 2008, 2.

<sup>160</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 2-3.

<sup>161</sup> James Drayton grew up to be a singer himself, and sang for Fortune Records groups the Five Dollars and the Don Juans. Adams interview, 8 April 2008, 11.

<sup>162</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 4.

<sup>163</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 4.

<sup>164</sup> Ms. Adams claims she cannot locate her marriage license. Adams interview, 26 June 2008

<sup>165</sup> “He took me out there to Uncle Tom’s Cabin (located on Eight Mile), and he told them, said ‘Give my wife a job.’ And Tom said, ‘What’s she going to do.’ He said, ‘She’s going to dance.’ Tom said, ‘Yeah, OK.’ Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 13-14.

<sup>166</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 11.

<sup>167</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 3 June 1939.

<sup>168</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 13 June 1942.

<sup>169</sup> Adams interview, 8 April 2008, 2.

<sup>170</sup> Alberta said that she has conflicting birth certificates. Adding to the consequent confusion over her real age is the fact that she changed her age to get work as an entertainer while she sought jobs in show business early in her career. Adams interview, 8 April 2008, 2.

<sup>171</sup> Adams interview, 8 April 2008, 3.

<sup>172</sup> In 1940, the Club B&C competed for customers with other Paradise Valley night clubs such as the Club Congo, the Turf Bar, Lark’s, the Bandbox, 606 Adams, the Swing Club and the Rhythm Club, not to mention cabarets that featured music such as the Midway Club, Henry’s Grill, Broad’s Grill, the Blue Bird Inn, H and I Inn and the Cozy Corner. All of the clubs were within blocks of each other. *Michigan Chronicle*, 17 February 1940. As the decade wore on, more clubs opened like Broad’s Club Zombie, Lee’s Sensation, Little Sam’s Cabaret, and Henry’s Swing Club.

<sup>173</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 14 March 1942.

<sup>174</sup> Adams interview, 8 April 2008, 2.

<sup>175</sup> Adams’s title, “Detroit’s Queen of the Blues,” is somewhat controversial. Clearly the Club B&C and *The Michigan Chronicle* are calling her Detroit’s queen of the blues long before she claims to have been designated queen of the blues by Apollo Theater owner Frank Shiffman while she toured with the Bluzettes (1952-1955). “He said, ‘I’m going to name you.’ I said, ‘What’s that?’ He said, ‘queen of the blues.’ I said, ‘Well, I have a partner.’ He said, ‘I’m talking to you.’” Adams interview, 26 June 2008.

<sup>176</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 21 August 1943, 23 October 1943.

<sup>177</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 13 May 1944.

<sup>178</sup> Adams interview, 8 April 2008, 2.

<sup>179</sup> “Sender” or “Solid Sender” had the slang meaning of a forthright person, that is, the sender of a message that was straight and powerful. In this context, “sender” seems to signify one who sincerely and without pretense “sends” a blues song to an audience or a person, with sincerity.

<sup>180</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 1 September 1945.

<sup>181</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 20 June 1942.

<sup>182</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 21 August 1943.

<sup>183</sup> The song was written and first recorded by Saint Louis Jimmy Oden in 1941 and released on Bluebird Records. Since then, the song has become a blues standard recorded by such blues artists as Memphis Slim, Roosevelt Sykes, Little Walter and Muddy Waters. The song has also been recorded by many “non-blues” artists, such as Aretha Franklin and Ray Charles. “Goin’ Down Slow,” accessed 7 May 2011, [http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/f/free/goin\\_down\\_slow.html](http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/f/free/goin_down_slow.html).

<sup>184</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 10-11.

<sup>185</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 32.

<sup>186</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 9.

<sup>187</sup> According to the *Michigan Chronicle*, “Alberta Adams, celebrated swinger of the blues, has proven by her long continuous run at the Club Owens, Paradise Valley most famous theater bar, that she has what it takes to satisfy Detroit night club audiences.” *Michigan Chronicle*, 1 September 1945.

<sup>188</sup> Wynonie “Mr. Blues” Harris played an early form of rhythm-and-blues, but the “Mr. Blues” moniker demonstrates that blues was still highly fashionable among African Americans and that jump blues was the basis for rhythm-and-blues.

<sup>189</sup> One musician's "burning" of another can be related to the African American musical tradition of cutting contests, which were informal duels, so to speak, meant to identify "the artist with the greatest creativity and skill." Burnim, *African American Music*, 10.

<sup>190</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 11.

<sup>191</sup> Adams interview, 8 April 2008, 4.

<sup>192</sup> Tonk is a variation on rummy that is played with a five-card deal. The game is based on the following point system: picture cards count ten points, aces count one point, and other cards count as face value. One obtains a "tonk" by holding a hand worth forty-nine or fifty points and is then paid twice—a double stake—by each of the players. Tonk was a popular card game among jazz players in the 1930s and the 1940s. Billy Strayhorn wrote a song called "Tonk" that Duke Ellington's Orchestra recorded in 1946. "Rules of Card Games: Tonk," accessed 12 November 2010, <http://www.pagat.com/rummy/tonk.html>.

<sup>193</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 17.

<sup>194</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 17-18.

<sup>195</sup> John C. Burnham, *Bad Habits: Drinking, Smoking, Taking Drugs, Sexual Misbehavior, and Swearing in American History* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 120, 250.

<sup>196</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 18.

<sup>197</sup> Moon, "Paradise Valley," 19.

<sup>198</sup> B. J. Widick, *Detroit: City of Race and Class Violence* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 99-111.

<sup>199</sup> Moon, "Paradise Valley," 19.

<sup>200</sup> Moon, "Paradise Valley," 19. Lee's Sensation was located in the North End at Owen and Cardonia, *Michigan Chronicle*, 13 October 1945. Little Sam's Club moved to Beaubian and Warren, *Michigan Chronicle*, 20 November 1943. The New Plantation Club opened at Warren and Russell, *Michigan Chronicle*, 28 October 1944. The Detroit Club Zanzibar opened on the city's eastside at Heidelberg St. and Ellery St, and The New Club Deliese opened far north of Paradise Valley on East Davison, *Michigan Chronicle*, 29 December 1945; Broad's Club Zombie opened on Oakland and Holbrook, another North End location, *Michigan Chronicle*, 13 October 1945. The Frolic Showbar opened at Clay and Russell, *Michigan Chronicle*, 18 January 1947. The Bizerte Bar was located at Oakland and Owen, *Michigan Chronicle*, August 28 1948.

<sup>201</sup> Sportree's Music Bar was located in the center of Paradise Valley on Hastings St. near East Adams Street, *Michigan Chronicle*, 8 June 1946. The Club El Sino was located in Paradise Valley atop the Club Owen at Beacon and St. Antoine, *Michigan Chronicle*, 5 April 1947.

<sup>202</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 25 May 1946.

<sup>203</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 6 July 1946.

<sup>204</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 24 July 1949.

<sup>205</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 20 June 1942, 15 April 1944, 1 September 1945, 13 July 1946, 11 October 1947, and 6 May 1948.

<sup>206</sup> At certain times in Alberta's career, other women emerged in Detroit bearing the title of "Queen," but, for the most part, they did not last. One, a woman named Letha Jones, billed at the Alvito Bar as a song stylist and blues queen, emerged in the advertisements in July 1960 and disappeared from the *Chronicle* advertisements thereafter. While club promoters initially may have granted both performers the title, Ms. Adams maintained hers through a combination of club promotions and the sanction of the African-American community newspaper. *Michigan Chronicle*, 10 July 1954.

<sup>207</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 28 August through 20 November 1948.

<sup>208</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 29 January 1949.

<sup>209</sup> While Adams was in a dressing room after working a Detroit club, a waitress came in and told her that a Mr. Ellington wanted to see her. Ms. Adams initially shrugged it off but was finally convinced to go to Ellington's table where she was assured that he was in fact Duke Ellington. "The Duke" offered her \$1,000 to perform two songs with him on an upcoming cruise. Ms. Adams still didn't believe the man who said he was Ellington and had to be convinced by bandleader Maurice King that she had really met the Duke. "I went on a cruise with him and all I had to do was them two tunes ("Hey Ba-Ba-Rebop" and "I'll Be So Glad When You're Gone"), go back to my cabin, and that was it. I didn't believe it. I just didn't believe it." Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 36-37.

<sup>210</sup> Ruth Brown with Andrew Yule, *Miss Rhythm: The Autobiography of Ruth Brown, Rhythm and Blues Legend* (New York: Donald I. Fine Books, 1996), 113-122.

<sup>211</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 6.

<sup>212</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 26.

<sup>213</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 26.

- <sup>214</sup> Angela D. Dillard, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), 203-204.
- <sup>215</sup> Widick, *Detroit*, 124. Dillard, *Faith in the City*, 202.
- <sup>216</sup> Widick, *Detroit*, 151. Dillard, *Faith in the City*, 216.
- <sup>217</sup> Widick, *Detroit*, 166.
- <sup>218</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 15.
- <sup>219</sup> Ted Talbert, *Michigan: The Magazine of the Detroit News*, September 20 1987, 9.
- <sup>220</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 24 September 1949.
- <sup>221</sup> Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 28.
- <sup>222</sup> *Michigan Chronicle* reported the sale or impending sale of the Lark Grill and the Club Three Sixes on 2 July 1949. The Detroit Police attempted to close the Club Valley (formerly the Club Three Sixes) during the week of 29 October 1949 after it was alleged that police found a seventeen-year-old girl in the Club Valley owner's other club, the Club Sudan. The Club Valley did not serve alcohol. *Michigan Chronicle*, 2 July 1949.
- <sup>223</sup> Chess Records," accessed 15 November 2010. <http://hubcap.clemson.edu/~campber/chess2.html>.
- <sup>224</sup> *Chess Blues*, MCA Records CHD4-9340.
- <sup>225</sup> Adams interview, 8 April 2008, 12. Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 27. Many independent record labels emerged in the rhythm-and-blues era, and the Chess brothers were not the only music industry mavericks known for underhanded business practices. Most of the rhythm-and-blues record labels that began to do business in 1940 and in the succeeding dozen years were white-owned labels, and most of those label owners were Jewish Americans. Out of approximately thirty independent record labels initiated between 1940 and 1952, African Americans owned only two, the Chicago-based Vee Jay and the Harlem-based Red Robin. George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, 27-28.
- <sup>226</sup> Alberta Adams, "Remember," *Chess Blues*, MCA Records CHD4-9340.
- <sup>227</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 1.
- <sup>228</sup> Adams interview, 8 April 2008, 10.
- <sup>229</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 15 January 1954.
- <sup>230</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 6 June 1953
- <sup>231</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, "Chubby and Alberta Still Rolling Along: All's Well With the World," 13 August 1955.
- <sup>232</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 12 March 1955.
- <sup>233</sup> Adams interview, 8 April 2008, 3. Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 19.
- <sup>234</sup> *The Michigan Chronicle*, "Chubby and Alberta Still Rolling Along: All's Well With the World," 13 August 1955.
- <sup>235</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 38.
- <sup>236</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 23.
- <sup>237</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 1955.
- <sup>238</sup> Adams interview, 8 April 2008, 3.
- <sup>239</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 22.
- <sup>240</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 22.
- <sup>241</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 101.
- <sup>242</sup> Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 78-79.
- <sup>243</sup> Arnold Shaw writes that "Chronologically, the R & B era embraces the 1940s and the early 1950s, whereas rock 'n' roll emerges in 1955-56." Arnold Shaw, "Researching Rhythm & Blues," *Black Music Research Journal* 1 (1980): 74. *Michigan Chronicle*, 15 July 1955 to 12 December 1956.
- <sup>244</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 24 March 1956.
- <sup>245</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 21 April 1956.
- <sup>246</sup> Gerri Hirshey, *Nowhere to Run: The Story of Soul Music* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 5.
- <sup>247</sup> George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, 108.
- <sup>248</sup> Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow, 1963), 225.
- <sup>249</sup> Jones, *Blues People*, 223.
- <sup>250</sup> Maria V. Johnson, "Electric Guitarists, Blues and Authenticity" in Hayes, Eileen M. and Linda F. Williams, eds. *Black Women and Music: More than the Blues* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2007): 57. "Marybeth Hamilton, Sexuality, Authenticity and the Making of the Blues Tradition," *Past & Present* 169 (Nov. 2000): 134.
- <sup>251</sup> Jones, *Blues People*, 235.

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- <sup>252</sup> As shown previously, Alberta's son, James Drayton, was one of the Five Dollars.
- <sup>253</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 12 May 1956.
- <sup>254</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 28 September 1957.
- <sup>255</sup> Adams interview, 8 April 2008, 8.
- <sup>256</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 28 March 1957.
- <sup>257</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 1956.
- <sup>258</sup> The manager's name is Rollo Vest. *Michigan Chronicle*, 30 November 1957.
- <sup>259</sup> Michael T. Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 176.
- <sup>260</sup> Bertrand, *Race, Rock*, 184-185.
- <sup>261</sup> Danielle L. McGuire, *At The Dark End Of The Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Alfred Knopf Publishing, 2010), 155.
- <sup>262</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 1956.
- <sup>263</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 30 November 1957.
- <sup>264</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008.
- <sup>265</sup> *The Michigan Chronicle*, 13 October 1945.
- <sup>266</sup> *The Michigan Chronicle*, 1958 (entire).
- <sup>267</sup> *The Michigan Chronicle*, 1959 (entire).
- <sup>268</sup> In 1961, only Phelp's Lounge, the 20 Grand, the Flame and the Rage Show Bar advertised a traditional floor show. *Michigan Chronicle*, June 17 to December 30, 1961.
- <sup>269</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 1 October 1960.
- <sup>270</sup> Frederic Dannen, *Hit Men* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 44-47.
- <sup>271</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 19 November 1960.
- <sup>272</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 10 June 1961.
- <sup>273</sup> Due to fast-growing suburbs in the metropolitan area, increased affluence of both white and black home seekers, racial prejudice, and realtor practices such as "blockbusting," the racial makeup of Detroit neighborhoods changed rapidly during the postwar period. In *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, historian Thomas J. Sugrue wrote that white neighborhoods bordering black neighborhoods, such as the one to which Adams moved, became particularly vulnerable to the blockbusting practices of realtors, who saw tremendous and quick profits in racial turnover. With the practice of blockbusting, realtors set out to terrify whites in numbers of ways, including spreading leaflets and making phone calls stating that black families were moving into the neighborhood, or even "paying a black woman to walk her baby through a white neighborhood." Often the outcome was that whites accepted under-market-value- and quick cash-offers from realtors, who could, in turn, raise the price of the residential properties for blacks. The realtors often acted as banks, offering cash to whites desiring to make a quick move, and making loans or offering land contracts to black homebuyers at exorbitant interest rates. "Working both sides of the embattled racial frontier made a lot of real estate brokers rich," Sugrue wrote. Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit, with a new preface by the author* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 195-197. Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 29-30.
- <sup>274</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 12.
- <sup>275</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 12-13.
- <sup>276</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 13.
- <sup>277</sup>
- Lawrence N. Redd, "Rock! It's Still Rhythm and Blues" *The Black Perspective in Music* 13 (Spring, 1985): 34.

## Chapter Three

## Taking the Blues out of the Girl: Motown Records and its Girl Groups of the 1960s

Detroit *Metro Times* writer Keith A. Owens has remarked that the success of Motown in the 1960s was also the bane of Detroit blues, which floundered in the years when Motown rode the top of the charts.<sup>278</sup> Although in one sense the remark seems overstated and leads one to believe that only a single factor prevented Detroit blues from flourishing in the 1960s, it is not an empty remark. Motown developed a unique rhythm-and-pop “sound,” which would much later be labeled as part of “Northern Soul” by English Motown fans. However, the local opportunities that Motown offered young women aspiring to be singers, and the appearance that Motown was not receptive to the blues nor the raw rhythm-and-blues of the 1950s, may have persuaded some young Detroiters to focus on giving Motown what Motown demanded.<sup>279</sup> In an indirect way, by beaming black music directly at the white, American teenager—to paraphrase Atlantic Records co owner Jerry Wexler—Motown, along with the British Invasion groups, generated an interest in American blues among young, white Americans, and may have led those teenagers to explore other forms of black music beyond Motown.<sup>280</sup> In the late 1960s and early 1970s, blues in the Detroit area became popular among white audiences who supported and consumed the blues in a number of ways, including attending blues festivals and blues clubs and buying blues records. What may have been closer to reality is that rather than having silenced the blues in Detroit, Motown became both a hindrance and a help to Detroit blues artists. Locally, Motown artists dominated nightclubs and airwaves, precluding other forms of music. On the other hand, Motown introduced a form of black music to whites, who could have sought out other forms of black music, including the blues. In the Detroit area, white interest in the blues would become



apparent in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when local blues festivals and events became popular.

While Motown's women appear to be standing in the shadows of the blues women looked at thus far, they also had a great deal of influence on Detroit blues women who appeared later in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Under Berry Gordy Jr.'s formalized and systematic process of production, little room existed for creative input on the part of Motown's female artists, who, after all, were at Motown to sing and look dazzling, and not take on additional roles, such as songwriter or producer. This is striking in comparison to the blues queens of the 1920s through the 1950s, most of who wrote some of their own songs, sometimes chose their accompanists, and rebelled against male dominance. The women of Motown found a classic patriarch in Gordy, the man who ruled the Motown "family." Gordy shunned from Motown the few who rebelled, women such as Mary Wells and Florence Ballard, and left them to their own devices to seek another record label or retire from the world of music. In many ways, the women of Motown were the antithesis of the blues queens.

When artists signed with the Motown label, Motown led them to believe a family business employed them and that by becoming Motown recording artists they became part of the Motown family.<sup>281</sup> Gordy was intent in Motown's early years on making three-minute musical commodities that would set sales records and garner radio play. Gordy, his producer-songwriters, his artist development program, his quality control panel, and the rest of his star-making machinery often succeeded in developing the women of Motown into highly successful recording artists and performers. As president of Motown, he promoted, demoted and manipulated women at will. Some women who left the label, like Mary Wells and Florence Ballard of the Supremes, felt shunned or exiled from the family.<sup>282</sup>

Music historians, Motown executives, and Motown recording artists have said that Motown records, which appealed to both black and white audiences, helped integrate music in the 1960s. Martin Luther King, Jr. indirectly concurred in 1967 when he said that black radio announcers who played rock-and-roll and rhythm-and-blues “paved the way for social and political change by creating a powerful cultural bridge between black and white.”<sup>283</sup> When Motown music caught on in the early 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement in the southern United States had gained respect in many parts of the nation. Some music historians who have focused on Motown believe that the larger Civil Rights Movement paved the way for a label like Motown to take a cross-racial approach to rhythm-and-blues.<sup>284</sup> The formal distinction between rock-and-roll, which came to represent white music, and rhythm-and-blues, terminology that came to signify black music, appeared only shortly before Motown’s inception in 1959. The music industry in 1957 instituted a formal separation between the two genres with separate charts, but young blacks undoubtedly bought Elvis Presley records just as white youths bought records by artists such as Chuck Berry and Little Richard.<sup>285</sup> Except within the music industry, which had generated and fostered racial distinctions in music since the appearance in the 1920s of “race” records, there was no real musical difference between rhythm-and-blues and rock-and-roll. Prior to 1957, many, including disc jockey Alan Freed, had used the terms interchangeably.<sup>286</sup>

Since Motown has been noted by music historians such as Peter Guralnick for its lack of rhythm-and-blues content, arriving at an understanding of how Motown fit within the context of the history of rhythm and blues is a challenge. Much has been said both critical and in support of the Motown “sound,” primarily regarding its cross-racial appeal. Some authors have asserted that Motown represented a soulless pop sound aimed specifically at white audiences.<sup>287</sup> Other authors, like Gerald Early, interpret the Motown “sound” differently. Early argues that Motown

music acknowledged R&B sources and “reaffirmed the power of R&B as pop music.”<sup>288</sup> By 1960, pop no longer applied to white performers only and there had been crossover hits. Black performers such as Dinah Washington, Sammy Davis Jr., Nat King Cole, and Johnny Mathis, among others, had broken barriers on the pop charts.<sup>289</sup> Crossover success also belonged to girl groups of color such as the Chantels and the Shirelles. Successful cover versions by white singers of rhythm-and-blues songs, such as Bill Haley’s and Pat Boone’s, urged some white listeners to seek out the real thing and put money into the pockets of black artists, record companies, songwriters and publishers.<sup>290</sup> Blacks seeking success on the pop charts generally had to water down their rhythm-and-blues to accomplish what was the musical equivalent of passing, as was the case with Nat King Cole. The people of Motown did something different. They succeeded in getting airplay on black *and* white stations, and perfected their craft of making hit records with black music as black and white teenagers accepted the music. In 1961, the Marvelettes became the first Motown group to crossover with “Please Mr. Postman,” a song that reached number one on Billboard’s rhythm-and-blues chart as well as its pop chart.<sup>291</sup>

Although Berry Gordy Jr. was often suspected of using payola to get Motown records played, investigations of Motown have come up empty and neither Gordy nor any of his staff was indicted for payola while working for Motown. What is known is that Gordy resorted to unethical practices to keep Motown music on the minds of Detroit’s key black disc jockeys.<sup>292</sup> Initially, Detroit’s black disc jockeys, who were quite an influence on the city’s white disc jockeys, proved instrumental in getting Motown off the ground by “breaking” (giving airplay to) the records. Gordy, cash poor in the early days of the company, received requests for money that he could hardly fill. He did “take care” of the disc jockeys in other ways, such as dispatching songwriter/producers Holland, Dozier and Holland to help move a white disc jockey to a new

home. Gordy helped other disc jockeys with airplane tickets and with small amounts of money to pay their “traffic tickets.”<sup>293</sup> Gordy also became known for what Motown historian has called “sexola” by dispatching Motown’s female artists on weekend-length trips to ostensibly work with out-of-town disc jockeys on radio-related events, even while the women were on tour.<sup>294</sup> Motown frequently flew them to other cities to do sock hops for DJs and visit DJs for promotional opportunities. According to Raynoma Gordy Singleton, Gordy’s second wife and business partner, Motown promotion directors beamed at the resources of Motown, which had no need for payola because of its bevy of female stars.<sup>295</sup>

Although Motown signed blues shouters like Mabel John, who had a local hit in 1961 but could not break out nationally, they usually did not last long at the label. John, rhythm-and-blues great Little Willie John’s sister, could not succeed singing the pop songs that Motown producers wanted her to sing.<sup>296</sup> She left Motown in 1964 and later went on to record for the Stax label in Memphis, which is regarded by some as one of the true bastions of 1960s soul music – a blend of rhythm-and-blues, gospel, and energy that swamped the pop charts during Motown’s heyday.<sup>297</sup> In the mid-sixties, when Motown partially reverted to its rough and raunchy rhythm-and-blues beginnings and began riding the soul wave of the mid-sixties and beyond, Motown singers like Gladys Knight, Junior Walker, and the Temptations no longer needed to disguise their rhythm-and-blues roots in order to hit the pop charts. The barriers had already been broken, not only by Motown, but by Stax and Chess and Atlantic Records, among others. In the beginning, Gordy sought out a saleable sound, and one that would appeal to both blacks and whites.<sup>298</sup>

Motown producers tended to shift their female recording artists away from tough sounding rhythm-and-blues and toward sweeter, less urgent sounds to achieve crossover success. In the early years of Motown, Berry Gordy paired both Wells and the Marvelettes with Smokey

Robinson, who intentionally smoothed their rough edges.<sup>299</sup> Robinson, leader of the Miracles and the singer-songwriter who inspired Gordy to set up his own label, also served as vice-president of Motown from 1961 to 1988. Wells became much more known for the softer, smoother sounds of Robinson-penned tunes like “My Guy,” “The One Who Really Loves You,” and “You Beat Me to the Punch,” than she did for self-penned scorchers like “Bye Bye Baby.” Referring to the above-mentioned smoother songs, Mary Wells said that the songs, with their cha-cha rhythms and their soft, buttery vocals, called for subtlety. “It’s what they call soul,” she said.<sup>300</sup> With the Marvelettes, Smokey picked the soft-toned voice of Wanda Young over the tougher sounds of Gladys Horton, the group’s initial lead singer, to make pop-chart-friendly songs like “Don’t Mess with Bill,” “My Baby Must Be a Magician,” and “The Hunter Gets Captured by the Game.” Although these producer-artist couplings show how Motown toned-down raw rhythm-and-blues, they should not indicate that Motown desired to create a “pop” song void of anything resembling rhythm-and-blues. Wells was right; the smooth, polished pop sound is soul according to Motown, but it was not the edgier, fervent kind of soul music that typified artists on labels such as Stax and Atlantic.

Berry Gordy used the assembly line or production line methods of the Detroit automobile industry and its division of labor as a model for his company when he first initiated the Tamla label in 1959.<sup>301</sup> Tamla, along with a few other Gordy-owned labels, came under the umbrella of the Motown Records Corporation when Gordy incorporated his assets the same year. Also in 1959, Gordy’s second wife and business partner Raynoma Liles discovered the two-story house on Detroit’s West Grand Boulevard that would become known as “Hitsville U.S.A.” and contain all the departments of the record company in Motown’s early years.<sup>302</sup> A musical child prodigy who studied harmony, theory and composition at Detroit’s Cass Technical High School,

Raynoma lived for music. She met Berry Gordy, Jr. in 1958 after a talent show performance. Two years later, the two married, and the union was both a romantic one and a business liaison. The pair formed Rayber Voices and offered their services as background singers to anyone who needed a hand cutting a record.<sup>303</sup> Ray also headed Motown's Jobete Publishing.<sup>304</sup> From 1960 to 1962, a beehive of activity among recording artists, musicians, and administrators coalesced within the relatively small building on the Boulevard.<sup>305</sup> A strict division of labor existed under the roof of Hitsville U.S.A., wherein recording artists could not be songwriter-producers, musicians could not be writers, and musicians, with few exceptions, could not become recording artists.<sup>306</sup>

Sometimes singer-songwriters when they came to the label, female vocalists, with few exceptions, quickly lost that classification when they signed with Motown.<sup>307</sup> Writers wrote and produced, and singers sang. Exceptions occurred for the women, but usually very early in their recording careers, and before Gordy had built up the strong stable of writers, for which Motown became known.<sup>308</sup> The Marvelette's raucous "Please Mr. Postman," was co-written by original Marvelette, Georgeanna Dobbins.<sup>309</sup> Similarly, but with less success, Wells came to Motown in 1960 with "Bye Bye Baby," a sizzling rhythm-and-blues song that she initially wanted to sell to Jackie Wilson with the assistance of Berry Gordy, who had written several songs for Wilson in the 1950s.<sup>310</sup> Berry and Raynoma Gordy convinced Wells to record it on her own and it peaked at number eight on the rhythm-and-blues charts, while making number forty-five on the pop charts.<sup>311</sup> Gordy's growing desire not to let any artist, with the exception of vice president Smokey Robinson, have too much a part of the hit-making process, ensured that most of the women became strictly singers and performers of songs credited to their producer/songwriters.<sup>312</sup> This meant less in terms of potential financial compensation as well as perhaps a diminishment

in prestige for the young women, but some, like Martha Reeves, who claimed to be a songwriter, seem to have shrugged off that blocked avenue in the hope of becoming singing sensations.<sup>313</sup>

Susan Whitall, author of *Women of Motown: An Oral History*, concludes, in part, that Motown ghettoized its female vocalists. Her conclusion is hard to argue with considering Motown's strict division of labor regarding the creative process as well as its efforts to separate the women from the business goings-on of the company.<sup>314</sup> Kim Weston, who became most famous for duets she performed with Marvin Gaye, and who was the wife of Motown producer Mickey Stevenson, described the division of labor at Motown as very constraining: "During the time I was at Motown, the artists were not allowed to produce themselves. And if they wrote a song, they had to give the person [producer] part of it in order to get it recorded."<sup>315</sup> Weston also remarked that singing styles were in many cases left up to the producer's whims, a practice that left little room for creativity on the part of the vocalists.<sup>316</sup> Referring to Wells's recording of "My Guy," Smokey Robinson said that during that period he was writing "sassy" and "sexy" songs for both Wells and the Marvelettes – his "babies."<sup>317</sup> In reference to Wells's "My Guy," Robinson acknowledges that he may have put her through fifty-plus takes of the song before he got what he wanted, which he describes as a "sassy little song."<sup>318</sup> When Gladys Knight and the Pips signed to the label in 1965 for an eight-year stay, Knight, who had resisted signing with the label but was voted down by the group, described a similar state of ghettoization: "We were artists and they didn't go for artists doing anything but singing," Knight said.<sup>319</sup>

Smothering creativity, adhering to the policy of dividing labor, depending on weekly quality control meetings presided over by Berry Gordy, Jr. to select songs for release, and relying on the later addition of an artists development department that taught Motown stars real-life and performance skills, all lent to the appearance that Motown "made" its female stars.<sup>320</sup> Berry

Gordy, Jr. said, “I wanted a place where a kid off the street could walk in one door an unknown and come out the other a recording artist – a star.”<sup>321</sup> The kids off the street, however, did not always come to Motown as untalented and unpolished as many Motown administrators and producers would have had the world believe. Gordy seldom shied away from downplaying the recording artists’ creative ability: “We taught them how to create,” Gordy said. “They couldn’t do it for themselves, so we did it for them.”<sup>322</sup> One of the Motown myths, Mary Wilson of the Supremes said, was the Pygmalion myth wherein Berry Gordy took a bunch of unwashed ghetto kids and made them into stars. “Not only is this view incorrect, it is insulting,” Wilson wrote in her memoir. “The truth is that Berry never signed anyone to Motown who needed to be remade.”<sup>323</sup> Berry Gordy, however, thought differently, and, sometimes rightfully, saw Motown as a sort of hit-making factory in which raw talent would go in on one end and exit the facility at the other end after being made into a saleable product, or a “star.”

To Berry Gordy, the Marvelettes, who came to Motown in 1961 after the teenage group starred in a high school talent show at Inkster High and consequently attended a Motown audition, must have at least looked like an “in” to crossover success. Like Perry Bradford, the man who arranged for Mamie Smith to record “Crazy Blues,” Gordy believed that black women would be less of a threat and more comforting to white audiences than black men, and that he would have better luck getting a foothold on the pop charts and obtaining crossover success with women.<sup>324</sup> The first Motown group to have a number one song on the pop charts with “Please Mr. Postman,” the Marvelettes also became the first girl group to get lost in the shuffle of competition among Motown artists in the early 1960s. Signed by Motown Records in 1961 after a talent show at Inkster High School, where the top three winners in the talent show won an audition at Motown, the Casinyets (which stood for the can’t sing yet) came in fourth.



However, the group convinced their principal to let them go along with the three winners to the Motown audition. Motown chief engineer at the time, Robert Bateman, held the audition. The Casinyets performed songs they had rehearsed for the talent show, but Bateman said that was not enough – they had to come up with an original song since there were few songwriters at Motown at that time. Group member Georgia Dobbins, an Inkster High School junior who opted out of the group when her father refused to co-sign a contract with Motown, wrote the basis of “Please Mr. Postman” with Inkster acquaintance and pianist William Garret, in approximately two days following the audition.<sup>325</sup>

The Casinyets, who returned to Motown one month following their audition, piqued Gordy’s interest. He changed their name to the Marvelettes prior to the recording of “Please Mr. Postman.” After the newly christened Marvelettes brought new fifth member Wanda Young into the group to replace Dobbins, the girls and their parents signed contracts, without legal representation, running for the duration of four years,. Motown held the option of renewing the contracts for an additional four years. The contract stated that Motown would choose all the songs to record, and that the group would record all songs to Motown’s satisfaction. The contract did not obligate Motown to release any recordings. A two-percent royalty rate went to the Marvelettes, who would split that percentage five ways.<sup>326</sup> Although songwriting credits for “Please Mr. Postman” have changed over the years, with later releases also credited to Berry Gordy, “Please Mr. Postman” originally listed the songwriters as Georgia Dobbins, Georgia’s Inkster acquaintance, and pianist, William Garret, as well as Motown producers Freddie Gorman, Robert Bateman and Brian Holland.<sup>327</sup> Gorman, also a mail carrier, suggested a few things for the song, but it is hard to believe that five people wrote “Please Mr. Postman.” It was common practice in the music industry then for producers and record company owners to claim

songwriting credit to enhance their earnings. As minors, and with the consent of their parents, the Marvelettes signed contracts that were one-sided to begin with, and Georgia Dobbins songwriter's share in the song diminished under the rubric of production and hit-making as others claimed a piece of the song.

Motown, which often inflated the number of records sold to impress the public and boost the egos of its artists, kept the Marvelettes in the dark about record sales, and often pressured them to do things that the girls did not think were in their best interests.<sup>328</sup> In 1961, the five original Marvelettes--Gladys Horton, Katherine Anderson, Wanda Young, Georgeanna Tillman, and Wyanetta Cowart--never knew if "Please Mr. Postman" reached one million in sales.<sup>329</sup> Since the song stayed for one week on the top of the pop charts and seven weeks at the top of the R&B charts, it probably did achieve gold record status.<sup>330</sup> The tremendous sales of "Please Mr. Postman" prompted Motown administrators to send the girls on the road, and Motown pressured them to drop out of high school. For some of the girls that was a not a problem, but for others, like Georgeanna, Wyanetta, and Katherine, who were all in their senior year and looking forward to graduation, it was a tough choice. The Marvelettes all left school when faced with Motown's threat of having the Marvelettes watch five other girls travel the country singing their hit in their place. Responding later to rumors that Motown officials wanted them eventually to go back to school, or take on tutors, Katherine Anderson responded skeptically. "Unlike the Supremes, we had a million seller right out of the box," Anderson said. "Therefore, they didn't give a damn if we finished or not."<sup>331</sup>

Until 1964, when Gordy decided to put everything he had at his disposal behind the Supremes, the Marvelettes prospered. Consequently, along with Motown's other big hitmaker Mary Wells, they stood as one of the driving forces behind Motown's success, but they also felt

the wind sag behind their sails. Although they were still successful at Motown, the Marvelettes felt slighted by Gordy's decision to concentrate on the Supremes. They also felt like they were playing a secondary role to Martha and the Vandellas, who were having huge successes with H/D/H tunes like "Heatwave" and "Dancing in the Street." "As time grew, you did feel slighted, you did feel neglected, you did feel pushed to the curb because everything and everybody had far more importance," Katherine Anderson said.<sup>332</sup> To make matters worse, illness caused two of the group's members to leave, and the remaining members still felt like they had not found a home at Motown.<sup>333</sup> From 1962 to 1964, the Marvelettes toured regularly and flitted from producer to producer, depending on the record. That could mean that Mickey Stevenson, Brian Holland, Robert Bateman, Freddie Gorman, or Lamont Dozier, or a combination of the five, produced the Marvelettes. In fact, it was often the case at Motown that each individual producer recorded an artist and competed for whose product was best.<sup>334</sup> The group also began to lose members. In 1963, Wyanetta suffered a nervous breakdown after making an embarrassing remark on American Bandstand about the location of Inkster in relation to Detroit.<sup>335</sup> Then, in 1964, Georganna discovered she had sickle cell anemia and had to leave the group.<sup>336</sup> The Marvelettes continued as a trio featuring Gladys Horton, Katherine Anderson, and Wanda Young.

Unlike the Supremes and Martha and the Vandellas, the Marvelettes preferred to stay on the so-called black chitlin' circuit when Motown began to prepare its acts for engagements at upscale white clubs like the Copacabana in New York.<sup>337</sup> Whether staying on the black club and theater circuit was the idea of Motown's or that of the Marvelettes is a point of controversy, but Marvelettes biographer Marc Taylor states that Berry Gordy Jr. did urge the group to rehearse show tunes in order to groom them for club work. Gladys Horton of the Marvelettes "was

adamantly opposed to such an avenue for her group.” In the Gladys Horton quotes that followed Taylor’s analysis in *The Original Marvelettes: Motown’s Mystery Group*, Horton said the group just was not up to the demands of playing to what would be an entirely new audience, which expected a different repertoire and presentation from performers. “It’s not that we were pushed aside, it’s just that we couldn’t do it,” she said. “Everybody didn’t have club material, and the Marvelettes never have been a club group; we were a theater group.”<sup>338</sup> Horton referred to theaters that had come to represent the Motown circuit, including the Apollo in New York, the Uptown in Kansas City, the Howard in Washington D.C., the Regal Theater in Chicago, and the Fox Theater in Detroit, which the Marvelettes had become accustomed to playing.<sup>339</sup> The new night club circuit, with its mid- to upper-class white audiences not only brought about class anxiety for the Marvelettes, but fear, insecurity, and a conviction that the group could not perform as well in the upscale white clubs as it could in the country’s black clubs and theaters.

When the artist development program became fully functional in 1964 with the addition of modeling, etiquette and performance instructor Maxine Powell, the Marvelettes, who had been training themselves in performance techniques for four years, came under criticism for their performance skills.<sup>340</sup> Some insiders at Motown, such as Harvey Fuqua, who supervised artist development and married Berry Gordy Jr.’s sister, Gwen Gordy, and ITMI’s Beans Bowles, took an absolute dislike to the Marvelettes. Fuqua complained of their lack of ability in performing the tasks Motown set out for them, and their inclination to shirk them in the first place.<sup>341</sup> “A lot of them could not. And a lot of them didn’t want to. That’s probably the big reason . . . They didn’t want to spend their time. They didn’t want to spend no time,” Fuqua said.<sup>342</sup> Beans Bowles, who was also the manager of the Motortown Revues, criticized them for their lack of professionalism onstage. In reference to one of the Marvelettes, Bowles said that when he saw

her at the Apollo Theater, he thought, “[W]e got to do better than this.” According to Bowles, “She walked onstage chewing gum looking like she was scared or playing a church or a talent show.”<sup>343</sup> Bowles and Fuqua both logged in years of show business before they came to Motown; most of the Marvelettes had just turned twenty-one by 1965, and had come to Motown while in high school. The Marvelettes had also logged in three years of roadwork, in which they created their own choreography.

William “Smokey” Robinson saved the Marvelettes from floundering further at Motown when he became their primary producer in 1965, but he also radically changed the group by choosing to focus on Wanda Young’s vocal talents over those of Gladys Horton. First, he and the Marvelettes scored a smash hit with Robinson’s “Don’t Mess With Bill.” Under Smokey’s direction, Wanda Young sang lead on most of the A-sides with Gladys Horton relegated to the B-sides of the singles.<sup>344</sup> Horton remained very popular with fans though, and Motown featured her lead vocals on albums and B-sides in deference to popular demand.<sup>345</sup> A string of Robinson-authored hits featuring Wanda on lead vocals followed, which included, “You’re the One,” “The Hunter Gets Captured by the Game,” “My Baby Must Be a Magician,” and “Here I Am Baby.” Their last hit, “Destination: Anywhere” (1968), also featured Wanda Young on lead vocals and was produced by Motown’s first female producer, Valerie Simpson, and partner Nickolas Ashford.<sup>346</sup> “Destination: Anywhere” did not feature Gladys Horton, who had left the Marvelettes in 1967 to settle down with a new husband and have a family life with their expected child.<sup>347</sup> The contrast between the pre-Robinson-produced Marvelettes and the Marvelettes under the direction of Robinson is striking. The group, stripped down to a trio, had been retooled from within and from without. By changing lead singers and finally finding a Motown producer

who would work with them from record to record, the Marvelettes had finally found a unique “hit.”

In combination with Wanda’s more subtle and softer vocals, Robinson’s songwriting for the group intentionally avoided teenage themes and contained subject matter and a sound aimed at adults as well. With Robinson-penned songs steeped in metaphor like “The Hunter Gets Captured By The Game” and “My Baby Must Be A Magician,” the Marvelettes again landed near the top of Billboard’s pop and rhythm-and-blues charts.<sup>348</sup> With Robinson, the Marvelettes, in terms of pop sophistication, distanced themselves from past hits like “Please Mr. Postman” and the Gladys Horton-penned “Playboy,” which were simpler in structure and in lyrical content. However, it is too easy to take the approach that Robinson brought about the entire transformation. According to Robinson, the Marvelettes brought a lot to the table. They had three lead singers with a lot of range for different songs,. Robinson adored Wanda’s voice: “Wanda was in the group and Wanda had that little sexy voice that I love . . . a little soft quiet sexy voice . . . and I said, hey, her voice is a hit . . . I started to record them with her singing and I had a lot of hit records on them.”<sup>349</sup> Smokey is due credit for the songs, which are superbly written, crafted and arranged. The instrumentation is excellent, and the overall sound of Smokey’s productions is stunning in a way that does not exactly fit the Motown mold. The songs became hits, though, through the musical combination of producer, band, and artists and the well-developed business acumen of Gordy and his Motown staff. As Robinson said, the Marvelettes and their individual talents brought a lot to the table.

Smokey Robinson continued to write for and produce the Marvelettes until 1968, but the group still felt like outsiders in relationship to the Motown family and soon disbanded.<sup>350</sup> The young women all hailed from the small, suburban black community of Inkster, and not the

overgrown and then extremely volatile city of Detroit. At Motown, they often felt as if they were treated like “country girls.”<sup>351</sup> Even Berry Gordy, who signed them to Motown, did not pay them much attention. There is speculation that the achievement of a number one single with little input from Gordy stood as the reason for his inattention to the group.<sup>352</sup> On the other hand, the Marvelettes could border on being ungrateful to Motown. When they could have espoused the label’s relationship to their success, they sometimes did otherwise. Both the Shirelles and the Marvelettes had number one hits on the pop charts in 1961 and often played on the same bills together. The Marvelettes praised the girl groups who came before them for showing them to the ropes more than they did Motown.<sup>353</sup> Much later, their songs began to slip on the charts. Their last single, “That’s How Heartaches are Made,” released in November 1969, peaked on the pop charts at ninety-seven and did not chart on Billboard’s Black Contemporary charts, which had become the trade magazine’s new designation for “race” records.<sup>354</sup> At that point, the Marvelettes receded so much into the background at Motown that it became hard for some people to tell if they were still on the label.<sup>355</sup> Motown was riding high on the charts again with Norman Whitfield’s “monstrous funk” productions of Temptations’ songs such as “Psychedelic Shack” and “Cloud Nine.” As outdated outsiders, the Motown group most easily slotted into “the girl group phenomenon of the early 1960s” disbanded in 1970.<sup>356</sup>

The ways in which Motown Records attempted to control its female artists and the record company’s bid for complete control over all of its artists surface in the court documents that chronicle Mary Wells’s successful effort in 1964 to leave the company. Wells filed the lawsuit, in which she claimed she no longer had a contract with Motown, after she became twenty-one years of age. Wells also accused Motown of withholding royalties and other earnings from her.<sup>357</sup> In Motown’s countersuit to Wells, the plaintiff, Gordy and vice president of sales

Barney Ales requested that Wells turn over one-million dollars to the company because of the plaintiff's alleged conspiracy to leave the label. Motown Records claimed ownership not only of Mary's earnings, but her success and stardom as well. The defendants argued that the company spent \$300,000 on training and promoting Wells. The defendants stated explicitly that Wells owed everything to Motown: Motown trained her and "her name and following" were property of the company.<sup>358</sup> The defendants' countersuit states further that Mary refused to pay the required twenty-five percent management fee to Motown management branch International Talent Management, Incorporated (ITMI) and refused to study and rehearse. She had also publicly announced another manager, and conspired with her husband, Herman Griffin, to lure other Motown artists away from the label, the defendants said.<sup>359</sup>

Gordy and Ales believed they had total control over Mary Wells's career while she was under contract, and they did do a significant amount of work for her in terms of promotion and attempting to improve her performance skills. Before the days of artist development, Motown hired Detroit's famed bandleader and talent coach Maurice King to help Mary Wells polish her act. Motown also placed her on "The Steve Allen Show." The company was able to generate many articles about Wells in teen magazines, and Motown's president and vice president of sales also claimed to have supported Wells when her records flopped. Wells, who toured with the Beatles and allegedly came to see music as an avenue leading to movie stardom, was not happy with Motown at the time. Morty Craft, president of Twentieth-Century Fox Records, offered her a \$500,000 advance to jump ship at Motown and sign with Twentieth-Century Fox, according to the defendants.<sup>360</sup>

For all Motown artists, signing with Motown also meant signing with Jobete Music, Motown's publishing company, and ITMI, Motown's management firm. This meant that



Motown not only had control of fees from the live performances of its artists, it also controlled their publishing proceeds for decades into the future.<sup>361</sup> Artists could negotiate royalty percentages, but with Motown, the rates in the early years were about two percent. Motown used artists' royalties were to pay for recording and production costs of a record. Motown owned copyrights, even with songs written by the artists.<sup>362</sup> Motown contracts sought complete control with as little risk as possible, and the combined contract, in which an artist signed with a record company, a management agency, and a publisher, represented a conflict of interest for the artists. Artists also found out after signing contracts with Motown that they could be charged for hidden costs against their royalties, such as recording sessions.<sup>363</sup>

Wells, with her mother's consent, had signed with Motown in 1960 at the age of seventeen.<sup>364</sup> She argued in the memorandum brief of the plaintiff that the contract should be nullified, since it actually expired in 1962. A letter to renew for another one-year term never reached her since International Talent Management, Inc. mailed it to its own address. This, the judge agreed, made the date of expiration of the singer's contract July 8, 1962.<sup>365</sup> The judge concurred with Wells and released her from her contract.<sup>366</sup> Following her split from Motown, Wells did not attain nearly the success that she had had at Motown, and the court case ironically served to help Motown to hold onto its other artists by demonstrating to them that Wells had failed after leaving the Motown fold. Consequently, other Motown artists became more convinced that they owed their success to Motown's expertise, and conceded that there was something to Motown's producers and procedures. Although rumors circulated that Motown used its connections with black radio to have Mary's post-Motown work quashed, Motown historian Nelson George speculates that, in 1964, Motown did not have the means or the power

to crush an artist. Furthermore, George said, the recordings Wells did after she left Motown were clearly inferior to her Motown recordings.<sup>367</sup>

Martha Reeves, the leader of the Vandellas, is a case in point of someone trained in music, which she practiced and performed before coming to Motown, and someone who, through her own efforts to improve her talents, refutes the notion that Motown “made” its artists. Born to a large family of eleven children that produced several musicians – both her parents played guitar and sang, and her father played blues -- Martha differed from many of the young women who came to Motown.<sup>368</sup> First, she was of age, unlike Motown stars such as the Marvelettes, Mary Wells, and the Supremes. Unlike the Marvelettes, who Motown chose to develop after a high school talent show appearance, Martha Reeves had a substantial performance history before she came to Motown. She performed as a solo artist and with girl groups the Fascinations and the Del Fis.<sup>369</sup> In early 1962, she recorded and released two singles with her group the Del Fis, on the Chess subsidiary label, Checkmate.<sup>370</sup> She performed everything from an aria at her high school graduation ceremony to blues and jazz in Detroit area nightclubs, including the famous Flame Show Bar and the 20 Grand, before she signed to Motown in 1962 at the age of twenty-one. Once at Motown, she continued to hone her talents. Reeves and the Vandellas, who backed up Marvin Gaye so many times that they became known as Marvin and the Vandellas, practiced background singing to bolster their singing skills. Reeves prided herself on her and the other Del Fis ability to arrange three-part harmonies and she states in her memoir: “[Before] you could effectively sing lead you had to perfect background singing.”<sup>371</sup>

Martha Reeves would prove to be as calculated in her ascent at Motown as she was methodological in her approach to singing, and the opportunity she had been waiting for while working as a secretary at Motown appeared as luck. Martha and the Vandellas got their break in

1962 when Mary Wells's absence from a recording session enabled them to record, "I'll Have To Let Him Go," their first song on Motown. Reeves called into the recording session the Del –Fis – Rosalind Ashford, Annette Beard, and Gloria Jean Williamson—and christened the group Martha and the Vandellas. In 1961, Mickey Stevenson encountered Reeves singing at the 20 Grand. The end of her run at the nightclub, Stevenson expressed an interest in her. He handed her his card and asked her to come to Motown the next day for an audition. The audition did not pan out, but Reeves finagled a secretary job from Stevenson that provided her with a great view to watch all the goings-on at the company.<sup>372</sup> Martha Reeves had been at the record company employed as a secretary for several months prior to the Vandellas' recording. "I'll Have to Let Him Go" did not chart well, but the other side of the single contained a song penned by Reeves called "My Baby Won't Come Back."<sup>373</sup> Reeves, described in literature on Motown as very astute, realized very early on that although she wrote songs, there would be little or no advantage for her to write them at Motown.<sup>374</sup> There is scant evidence that Motown "made" Martha Reeves. It is more likely that with Motown's resources, in terms of record distribution, ability to obtain radio play, and its songwriting, Motown enhanced Martha's skills and talents and made them marketable.

Some Motown producers and songwriters undoubtedly added some formidable talents of their own to the skills held by an artist. An example of such masters of embellishment were three Motown songwriters, Brian Holland, Lamont Dozier, and Eddie Holland (H/D/H), who had combined forces at Motown in 1962 to become the songwriting team to beat at Motown until they wrangled out of their contracts in 1968 and left Motown to form their own label.<sup>375</sup> The combination initially was very beneficial to Martha and the Vandellas, whose next stab at the charts succeeded with H/D/H's "Come and Get These Memories."<sup>376</sup> Motown delayed the

release of “Come and Get These Memories” until 1963, but its eventual success would mean more pairings of Martha and the Vandellas and H/D/H. Those sessions produced wildly successful Vandellas and H/D/H pop-and-rhythm songs such as “(Love is Like) a Heatwave” [1963], and “Quicksand” [1963].<sup>377</sup> Taken aback by the combination of the Vandellas and H/D/H, Berry Gordy had an epiphany after hearing “Memories.” According to Reeves, Gordy said, “[t]hat’s the sound I’ve been looking for. That’s the Motown sound.”<sup>378</sup> Described abstractly as magic by many Motown fans and employees, the Motown sound allegedly represented black Detroit. Lamont Dozier described the magic more succinctly: “The Motown sound is spiritually orientated, a mixture of rhythm and blues and pop with a big beat bottom combining black heritage gospel to produce a magical thing.”<sup>379</sup> With “Heatwave,” which provided Motown with a template for hit-making that would produce hits for years into the future, the Vandellas became Motown’s second girl group to provide what Gordy had then come to define as “The Sound of Young America.”<sup>380</sup> Motown chronicler Nelson George writes: “As for Martha, her voice blasted through the production flourishes on “Heat Wave” in a defiant, lustful performance that shows an emotional intensity “Memories” had only hinted at.”<sup>381</sup> Martha Reeves may have benefited as much from the experience she brought to the label as she did from Motown’s helping hand.

Smokey Robinson rejects the idea that Detroit had any more talent than other large American cities at the time, but *One Nation Under a Groove: Motown and American Culture* author Gerald Early presents a strong argument in support of Detroit as an incubator of music.<sup>382</sup> He traces what he calls a “hothouse of musical talent” in Detroit to the emphasis Detroit blacks placed on musical education. Early cites the pioneering turn-of-the-twentieth-century work in musical education of E. Azalia Hackley, a Detroit woman who was called “Our National Voice

Teacher” in the black press. Hackley taught classical European music.<sup>383</sup> He concludes his argument by stating simply that “Motown could not have happened without a strong musical-education program in Detroit.”<sup>384</sup> Even if the city itself was not an incubator of music, it appears that the high schools were. High school students need walk no further than down a couple hallways to find musical instruction, and some Motown artists rarely missed a chance to mention their high school music instructors. Like the Supremes, the Marvelettes, Mary Wells, and Martha Reeves benefited from the musical training at Detroit Public Schools.<sup>385</sup> Martha Reeves and the Supremes spoke highly of Northeastern High School Musical Director Abraham Silver. The Marvelettes’ Gladys Horton swore by the teaching of Inkster High School’s music teacher Dr. Romeo Phillips. All the girls in the Supremes and the Marvelettes sang together in their schools’ glee clubs.<sup>386</sup> Looking back to the early 1960s in a 1974 newspaper article, Silver said, “students at that time did not mind hard practice. They drilled all the time.”<sup>387</sup> Practice like this, along with inherent talent, is what enabled Reeves to sing Mozart arias and made Ballard and Wilson capable of singing opera. It also helped the Supremes sing rock and roll or rhythm and blues, which was something they rehearsed frequently in high school.<sup>388</sup>

Another argument for why Detroit at that time could virtually have been “hothouse of talent” is that the city was practically unexploited by talent scouts and such from the larger record labels. Detroit talent remained pretty much untouched during the time that Gordy set up shop, and there were plenty of venues that Gordy unearthed talent, such as established nightclubs like the Flame and the 20 Grand, neighborhood sock hops, high school talent shows, and even street corners in the city where vocal groups rehearsed.<sup>389</sup>

Female performers struggled inside and outside the studio at Motown, but the biggest test of all for them was large-scale live performance. Nearly the whole family went out on tour

together in the early sixties. Touring commenced in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement in 1962 with the Motortown Revue.<sup>390</sup> Esther Gordy Edwards, who headed ITMI or International Talent Management, Inc., the Motown management agency that held contracts with all Motown performers, organized the tours. Thomas “Beans” Bowles served as road manager.<sup>391</sup> The first Motortown Revue consisted of ninety-one one-nighters, with the exception of the Apollo Theater in New York, where the Revue played for seven days. The tour lasted for approximately three months. It starred Martha and the Vandellas, the Marvelettes, Mary Wells, and the Supremes, among others. In her memoir, Martha Reeves described the tour stop at the Apollo Theater as thus: “For seven days we performed six shows a day starting at 12:00 noon and ending at 1:00 a.m.”<sup>392</sup> The Revue, which focused on the East Coast, the Midwest, and the South, and combined nearly the entire Motown roster for live presentations, put them on a bus, and sent them to venues across the country, was not the first package tour of its kind. It was novel in a business sense, though, since ITMI, which collected proceeds from the shows of up to \$15,000 on a daily basis while only paying the artists a small stipend on the tour, could instantly use the profits to promote Motown records and for other business.<sup>393</sup>

Undertaken by Motown a year after freedom riders were beaten and nearly killed in the South, the Motown Revue and its entourage, which consisted of one tour bus and five cars, filled mostly with young black people, might have represented a freedom riders sequel to some white southerners. The tour, which introduced Motown’s young performers and their escorts to rigid southern segregation, had its harrowing moments. Although the revue’s bus, its automobiles, and its passengers did not receive the same treatment from white southerners as the freedom riders, one person shot at the bus, “and segregated facilities and uncivil treatment were common.”<sup>394</sup> Besides the usual trappings of segregation, such as separate bathrooms and

drinking fountains, the inability of black travelers to dine in restaurants or easily find lodging in the South, the Motown acts soon realized that not saying “sir” or “ma’am” to white southerners could be enough to get them killed. They also played to segregated audiences, usually divided by main floor, where white patrons sat, and balcony, where black patrons sat. If a theater did not have a balcony, theater managers divided the room with a rope stretching from center stage to the back of the theater. However, they could not totally control the young patrons, who sometimes broke through whatever apparatus of segregation was present and turned the shows into interracial dance parties.<sup>395</sup> These dancing melees further provoked southern white supremacists, many of whom already feared that the allegedly corruptive “jungle music” would lead to race mixing and miscegenation anyway, who were seeing their worst nightmares come true.

Commenting on the southern stops of the 1962 tour, Katherine Anderson of the Marvelettes said, “[t]hese are things that stay with you for the rest of your life.”<sup>396</sup> Traveling in the South, where Motown women could not go anywhere without two or three local escorts, kept the girls, especially, on their guard. “It became very, very, frightening,” Anderson said.<sup>397</sup> Something as trivial as not complying with the peculiar rules of racial etiquette that prevailed in the South at the time could be enough to get any member of the entourage in trouble. The young women were also prone to rape and other types of sexual violence and, acknowledging the presence of multiple chaperones, were probably keenly aware of that danger. While all black (and even some white) performers tried to outmaneuver racial dangers in the southern states, a black female performer’s endangerment probably doubled in the South, where rape and other forms of “sexual violence against black women was endemic” and often went unpunished by some of the white supremacists in the southern states who meted out justice.<sup>398</sup>

Despite the shock of southern segregation and the rigorous performance schedules that Motown had laid out for its artists, some of the Motown women, like Anderson and Reeves, truly enjoyed the tour, saying it gave them a chance to get out of their somewhat constricting and stultifying black community of Detroit. Touring allowed them to make new friends and acquaintances in different parts of the country and the world, the chance to grow and expand their worldviews and social worlds, and the opportunity to take in the lessons touring taught them on how to deal with people from all walks of life. “As with many artists who lived within the black community at the time, it was an avenue that allowed you to travel to other states and cities and gave you that ‘out.’ In doing so it also helped you to grow,” Katherine Anderson said.<sup>399</sup> Travel was beneficial to the early blues queens because it familiarized them with both the southern and the northern United States and allowed them to both pick up and to disperse acquired news, knowledge and wisdom. Likewise, travel in the early 1960s proved beneficial to some of the Motown women, who found it an adventure rather than a burden and appreciated the sense of sophistication they obtained through travel.

On the tour, there were also some prohibitions on the artists. Motown rules strictly forbid male-female contact, and the company attempted to repress any sexual goings-on during the tour. Chaperones accompanied the women and the girls on the tours, which was something that set the women of Motown apart from the men. Nonetheless, two of the Marvelettes found Motown spouses during the initial tour, and many occurrences of the girls being caught playing cards with men after curfew.<sup>400</sup> The women, and the men, were very young. Martha had just turned twenty-one that summer. The Marvelettes, Diane Ross, and Mary Wilson were all eighteen. Mary Wells and Florence Ballard were nineteen.<sup>401</sup> Nearly all the performers were under twenty-one, according to Beans Bowles.<sup>402</sup>



Motown historian Nelson George wrote that artists mixing with the older musicians on the tour often resulted in the use of marijuana and alcohol among the younger women.<sup>403</sup> “We hovered over our artists, mostly female, to protect them during their time at Motown,” said producer and A&R director Mickey Stevenson.<sup>404</sup> When Susan Whitall interviewed Martha Reeves years after the tour, Reeves said that after about the thirtieth night of the ninety-one date tour, “we were all getting a little familiar with each other.”<sup>405</sup> Reeves said she was not guilty, but that giving the chaperones a hard time came naturally to other Motown artists. Motown executives and the chaperones constructed a rather shaky code of morality, and the young Motown artists found ways around it.

Among the Revue’s youngest artists were the Supremes, whose members, then still in high school and performing under the name of the Primettes, started to hang out at Motown when their brother group, the Primes (about one half of the group that would become the Temptations) signed a contract with Motown in 1960. Berry Gordy warmed slowly to the Primettes but soon came to view the girl group as his frontrunner in Motown’s bid for crossover success. Eventually devoting a great deal of time grooming the group for the stage and singling out Diane Ross (later Diana) to be the group’s star, Gordy understandably took a great deal of responsibility for the Supremes phenomenal success. There is evidence, however, that shows that the girls, as the Primettes, came to Motown with musical talents and performing skills in hand. The group first practiced in the hallways and on the roofs of the Brewster Homes projects on the near east side of Detroit along with many other vocal groups. They competed “. . . for attention . . . for a choice space to practice in . . . [and] . . . for some kind of recognition in a place that didn’t offer too much hope for any of them.”<sup>406</sup> Mary Wilson said parents in the Brewster Homes tried to encourage their kids by reminding them that life in Detroit in the 1950s

for African Americans did not look as gloomy as it did when they grew up. Mary's generation, she writes, "Was perhaps the first generation of black youths to believe their individual potential was unlimited."<sup>407</sup>

In the case of many vocal groups that later became Motown artists, the youngsters worked hard and practiced to achieve their potential and their dreams. They were probably some of the Detroit black kids who turned away from the blues of their parents and took comfort in the more positive themes found in rhythm-and-blues. Entering the realm of public performance outside Brewster Homes became the girls' first dream. They accomplished that by becoming the Primettes, the sister group to the Primes. As the sister group to the Primes, a group that contained future Temptations Eddie Kendricks, and Paul Williams, the Primettes made a lot of headway on a local level.<sup>408</sup> As the Primes's sister group, they rehearsed daily in Primes' manager Milton Jenkins's apartment.<sup>409</sup> Thrilled with their first show, which took place at party held in a local union hall, the Primettes had more reason to dream.<sup>410</sup> Mary Wilson remembers that they excelled as a group, not as four individuals. She said they were conscious at the time of the difference.<sup>411</sup> Although they may have been unpolished by Motown standards, they arrived at the label in 1960 after the Primes signed with Motown with learned skills, experience, and talent. Following their audition, Raynoma Gordy remarked that the girls displayed excellent dancing skills and sophisticated group vocals.<sup>412</sup>

Beginning in 1960, the Supremes (then the Primettes), or "the girls," as they became known around Hitsville U.S.A., came to Motown every day after high school. They added handclaps and background vocals to Motown Recordings. "[On] January 15, 1961, Florence Ballard, 17, Mary Wilson, 16, Diane Ross, 16, and Barbara Martin, 16, signed to Motown as the Supremes."<sup>413</sup> With their parents' consent, the girls signed a four-year contract with Motown that

required that they record a minimum of three masters for the sum of \$12.50 each. Their royalty rate was set at 2.4 percent per record, a sum paid only after recording expenses and production costs were met. Like the Marvelettes and other Motown artists, the Supremes concurrently signed with Motown-owned Jobete Publishing and Motown's management company, ITMI. According to Nelson George, ". . . with obvious foresight, [Gordy] maintained the unbalanced relationship between black artists and record companies that whites had already established."<sup>414</sup> Martin left the group in 1961 after she married and became pregnant, and before the remaining trio of Wilson, Ballard, and Ross signed to Motown.<sup>415</sup> Due to several unsuccessful recordings, Motown employees tagged "the girls" with the nickname the "no hit Supremes."<sup>416</sup>

It was during the "no hit" period that Berry Gordy, Jr. let Florence Ballard know that she had lost the competition to be lead singer. All the Supremes shared lead vocals, but Ballard had a bluesy and brassy vocal style. The group, which had once relied primarily on Ballard for her gospel- and R&B-tinged lead vocals, instead relied on Ross's thin, clear, and nasal voice. Ballard, compared to straight rhythm-and-blues singers like Laverne Baker, Ruth Brown, and Etta James, reluctantly dropped her bid for the lead-singing job. Berry Gordy, Jr. wanted nothing to do with a classic rhythm-and-blues voice. In the words of cultural critic Jacqueline Warwick, the voice doomed Ballard from the start.<sup>417</sup> Flo sang lead on "Buttered Popcorn," a B-side on one of the early singles. The song started to get airplay on radio stations in and around Detroit. Gordy, who co-wrote the song, dismissed encouragement from co-writer Barney Ales to give the song an all-out promotional campaign. Gordy's decision not to promote the song "reflected Berry's decision to make Ross's untrained voice the sound of the Supremes."<sup>418</sup>

Historians have written that the Civil Rights Movement created the broad umbrella under which "integration as typified by Motown wide appeal could occur," but whatever the Civil

Rights Movement did, the Supremes enhanced it.<sup>419</sup> Beginning in 1964, the Supremes and the producers Holland/Dozier/Holland (H/D/H) teamed up to almost consecutively place ten songs at the top of the pop- and rhythm-and-blues charts.<sup>420</sup> When combined with Gordy's efforts to take the blues out of the girls and refine the group's sound, H/D/H's pop-perfect rhythm-and-pop sound made the Supremes irresistible to an audience that crossed many social barriers. Their songs did not just appeal to whites. The songs usually charted just as high on the rhythm-and-blues charts as they did on the pop charts.<sup>421</sup> Cross-class, cross-gender, cross-generational and cross-race, their popularity extended from high society to the Beatles to fraternity parties to urban ghettos. The songs played in the clubs of the North and in the juke joints of the South.<sup>422</sup> In his book, *Souled American: How Black Music Transformed White Culture*, cultural critic Kevin Phinney wrote that Berry Gordy's master plan to sell records on both sides of the racial divide served more as a marketing strategy than an effort to integrate. He also said that Gordy had few illusions "of fostering social unity through music."<sup>423</sup> What Gordy had in the Supremes, though, was a girl group that just may have accomplished that.

In memoirs and interviews of Motown artists, there is a belief that Motown music did bring black and white together in the tumultuous 1960s. Supreme Mary Wilson wrote that the group's music "transcended color," "[b]rought all kinds of people together," and "made [whites] aware of blackness" in her memoir *Dreamgirl: My Life as a Supreme*. "Some people have to march and scream and yell but I think Motown did it through music," Wilson wrote.<sup>424</sup> Four Tops lead singer Levi Stubbs attributed the power to change to the whole Motown family, and said much the same as Wilson: "Motown was responsible for black and white music merging . . . They wanted to reach everybody."<sup>425</sup> Whether marketing strategy or a genuine attempt to bring about racial harmony--and it remains unproven whether one motive excludes the other--the label

could hardly lose in the 1960s when Motown placed over three-hundred songs on the charts.<sup>426</sup> Phinney remarked that Gordy may have thought that guiding a black-owned business to major label status in five years was a racial statement in itself.<sup>427</sup> Several years later, in a 1974 *Sepia* article titled “America’s Biggest Black Business: The Motown Empire,” authors Patrick and Barbara Salvo wrote, “Berry Gordy has done what no other black music man has ever been able to do, take his own deep-rooted black music and exploit it effectively by drawing 70 percent of his audience from the white middle class.”<sup>428</sup>

Many of the Supremes’ songs are instantly memorable three-minute sketches of love- and life-tribulations that, at the time of their release, proved to be a formidable cultural force, particularly in the United States and Britain. The Supremes and the H/D/H songwriting team promoted love and romance in their songs, but none of the outright sexuality espoused by the blues women. All thirteen of the Supremes A-sides produced by H/D/H reflect on romance and love.<sup>429</sup> With few exceptions, H/D/H, which by that time had thoroughly sculpted a modern Motown sound, supplied the Supremes with lyrics that did not stray far from the established girl group terrain of love and loss mapped out by such groups as the Shirelles, the Chantels, the Ronettes and Crystals. However, taking a cue from Gordy, their influences also included the yesterday sounds of the Andrews sisters and of classics culled from Tin Pan Alley and Broadway. At that time, the Supremes literally competed on the charts with the Beatles, but Gordy and the Supremes also figuratively competed with the Andrews Sisters, a trio that sold somewhere near 100 million records in their long career.<sup>430</sup>

The Supremes acted as cultural conservators and cultural innovators, but the group conserved pop culture more than it conserved black culture. With two feet in the past – the Andrews Sisters phenomenon of the late 1930s and 1940s, and the girl group phenomenon of the

late 1950s and the early 1960s – the Supremes’ live presentation was layered with elements of pop music, past and present. Other elements of their presentation, such as the music that propelled them forward, their slick, group dance moves, and their scintillating wardrobes, represented the cutting edge of 1960s’ modernity.<sup>431</sup> In this respect, they resemble the blues women. With a stage show divided between nostalgic offerings, contemporary show tunes and a new sort of pop-and-rhythm that did indeed extend its allure across races and across generations, the Supremes had mass, or as Gordy would say, universal appeal. In a sense, Gordy had given them the means to obtain that appeal. Gordy, who had several years invested in honing the talents of Diana and the Supremes, could look at the group as Motown’s most successful and most saleable commodity.

The Supremes presentation was the revolutionary aspect of the group, and when Motown’s Artist Development department set up shop in 1964 and became fully functional, the Supremes easily gravitated toward finishing- and modeling-expert Maxine Powell. Powell said she trained the Supremes, and all Motown artists who became her pupils, to entertain presidents and kings.<sup>432</sup> In a more practical sense, Powell trained the Supremes to carry themselves as bourgeois women while they performed before middle- to upper-class adults. One indication of Gordy’s out-of-the-ordinary investment in Ross is that he sent her to outside modeling schools as well.<sup>433</sup> The incorporation in 1964 of the final detail of artist development, which offered vocal and dance training as well as what Powell offered, coincided with Berry Gordy Jr.’s decision to put all he had behind making the Supremes Motown’s goldmine and Diana Ross Motown’s star.<sup>434</sup> Powell instructed the Supremes with the rules of proper etiquette and deportment, and gave them tips on performance technique, such as how to properly hold a microphone. The Supremes seemed to have truly admired Powell, yet they feared her wagging finger. Powell’s

lessons were ingrained in Mary Wilson's head. "I can remember feeling her eyes upon me as I walked around with books on my head. Were my shoulders straight? Was my posture good?"<sup>435</sup> Wilson reported that the Supremes, unlike some other Motown acts, loved going to Powell's classes and that the group became Powell's "star pupils."<sup>436</sup> "We weren't being taught something we didn't want," Wilson wrote, "We aspired to be the best." Berry Gordy Jr., who continued to give the Supremes the best songs Motown could offer, the best training, and the best stage apparel, helped reinforce their dreams of attaining excellence. Given their willingness to cooperate with all aspects of Gordy's crossover plans, the Supremes, who became another cause for grief within the Motown family, stood squarely above all others at Motown.

Gordy seemed to have needed to push Ross to the front of the group, and she shared his dream of a crossover success. Diana Ross fit well into Gordy's modern-day brand of alchemy. She was a girl from the projects of Detroit with a unique voice and look who had more than enough raw talent for Gordy to work with. Matched with the Motown star making machinery, she could be just the kind of Motown star Gordy envisioned—one that he taught to To be a star. Since Mary Wells, Gordy felt the best chance of crossover success would come with a female singer. The Motown president thought a black woman would be less threatening and more comforting to a white audience than a black man would.<sup>437</sup> Secondly, he believed Ross projected a more commercial and saleable voice and look than the other Supremes.<sup>438</sup> The voice, once described as "a truly pop voice . . . an absolutely depthless synthetic voice," is also a one-of-a-kind voice, which was another ingredient Gordy thought would be required to cross over.<sup>439</sup>

Thomas "Beans" Bowles, commenting on voices at Motown, said:

Nobody at Motown could sing. But Berry's thing was to get a voice that wasn't easily duplicated. At the time, everyone would copy your record if they had a sound alike. And that would take all the money away. So nobody sounded like

Smokey. Nobody sounded like Diana Ross. Nobody sounded like Marvin Gaye.  
440

It might also have been Ross's ability to hustle that led to the attachment between Gordy and Ross. Nelson George writes that Ross was an enterprising person long before she was a success at Motown. She gave permanents and sewed clothes, both for a fee. She also became the first black busgirl at J.L. Hudson's, where she worked after school. <sup>441</sup>

Berry Gordy, Jr. loved the fact that Martha and the Vandellas and the Supremes triumphed at clubs like the Copacabana in New York and at casino clubs of Las Vegas, and, in a certain respect, he seemed to value the upscale nightclub engagements more than he did his growing list of hit records.<sup>442</sup> Not only an effort to break into the adult, white mainstream and bring in bigger revenues, engagements such as these became small milestones in civil rights. The Supremes, who debuted at the Copa in New York City in 1965, became the only all girl group, the first R&B group, and the first pop act to play the elegant nightclub.<sup>443</sup> A Billboard reporter asked Berry Gordy, Jr. in a 1993 interview about what attracted him to the country's upscale nightclubs and Gordy spoke of the mesmerizing effect the night clubs of New York and Las Vegas had on the people back in Detroit. And although the Supremes and Martha and the Vandellas arrived at the clubs loaded with show-tune arrangements, Gordy said playing such venues acknowledged the "universal" appeal of Motown music: "[Our music] had become something that [our artists] need never be ashamed of. I was never ashamed of it, but I realized I'd fallen into the trap of thinking like that."<sup>444</sup> On the Supremes opening night at the Copa, Gordy felt as if he were betting all he had on the Supremes. "If the Supremes flopped, they could set our music back ten years. If they did well, it could open doors for other Motown acts," Gordy wrote in his autobiography. With Motown, Broadway and Tin Pan Alley music on their



side, the Supremes triumphed and Gordy wrote, “I was watching what the reviewers would later say was one of the most dramatic openings the Copa had ever seen.”<sup>445</sup>

Draped in gowns that harkened back to the glory days of Hollywood, dripping jewels and displaying sophisticated stage etiquette, the Supremes graced the stages of the country’s nightclubs for the upwardly mobile and became omnipresent images on American television. Interviewers and talk-show hosts solicited their opinions on volatile racial matters in the United States.<sup>446</sup> Following the original girl group model, wherein adolescents presented themselves to adolescents as fellow adolescents, did not cross Gordy’s mind. Like Phil Spector, who set out to make three-minute teenage operas, Gordy wanted hit records, but he was more ambitious than that—he wanted universal appeal. When the Copacabana first engaged the Supremes in 1965, the Supremes became adolescents masquerading as adults, to adults, and emitting “upwardly mobile adult bourgeois charm.”<sup>447</sup> Perhaps more importantly, they became respectable. On the air, they tried to quell the public following the King assassination.<sup>448</sup> Diana endorsed Humphrey in the 1968 presidential election.<sup>449</sup> Gordy engineered these media happenings, and gave Ross instructions as to what to say. In a sense, television hosts had good reason to ask these questions of the Supremes. They sprang from the same environment as many of the participants in the 1967 uprising in Detroit. Nelson George remarks that while Gordy never spoke publicly about the Civil Rights Movement, he did promote it first by releasing a recording on the Gordy label of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, recorded at the Great March to Freedom in Detroit in June 1963 prior to the March on Washington in August.<sup>450</sup> Later in the decade, he established the Black Forum label, which released spoken word albums by King, Stokely Carmichael, and other civil rights and black power figures.<sup>451</sup>

In public, the group played out the fairy-tale scenario that Gordy laid out for them, but as the vision of the fairy tale receded, a darker side emerged. In Gerald Early's words, behind-the-scenes upheaval in the group mimicked the unfolding of a Greek tragedy.<sup>452</sup> By 1965, Mary and Diana had reached the age of twenty-one, and Florence had reached twenty-two years of age. Ballard, who had long ago lost control of the group, also lost her status as a sometimes lead vocalist in the group. The occasion took place when Berry Gordy, Jr. interrupted her at a Supremes rehearsal at either New York's Copacabana or Detroit's Roostertail nightclub and commanded that Diana sing the song, "People," first popularized by Barbara Streisand, which Florence sang in the group.<sup>453</sup> Florence had developed a drinking problem by that time, and had gained weight. She had also convinced herself that both Gordy and Ross sought to undo her.<sup>454</sup> Repeated barbs and insults from Gordy and Ross, and, perhaps more importantly, Gordy's tendencies to further and further minimize her role in the group, gave Ballard good reason to be suspicious.<sup>455</sup> Finally, in April 1967, after years of Ballard's suffering and paranoia, Gordy fired her from the group. She did not protest, and neither Diana Ross nor Mary Wilson defended Ballard. The Supremes' all-for-one ethos had seemingly evaporated. Berry Gordy, Jr. hired Flo's replacement, Cindy Birdsong, months before Ballard's departure, and she was already rehearsing to be a Supreme.<sup>456</sup> Gerald Early theorizes that Gordy had to push someone out of the group to prove that other women in the Supremes were expendable now that Ross had become the star and the necessary one. Ballard, as well as Wilson for that matter, had no function in the group other than that of a background singer.<sup>457</sup> Though he had put her in that position himself, Gordy now could justify thinking of her as expendable.<sup>458</sup>

Ballard had started the group out of Brewster Homes, a segregated public housing project on Detroit's near East Side where all the Supremes grew up. The eighth of thirteen children,

Florence moved to the projects after first having lived in a house on MacDougal Street in Detroit that her parents bought and moved into in the early 1950s. Her father, a Chevrolet worker and a blues guitarist, first taught her to sing.<sup>459</sup> Ballard, a singer of blues, rhythm and blues, European classical music, and opera before she came to Motown, seemed to be the strongest candidate to lead the group. Unfortunately, Berry Gordy, Jr. did not desire a straight R&B singer, nor was hers the sound that Gordy believed the teenage market of the 1960s wanted to hear.<sup>460</sup> By the time the Supremes played to an adult market, Ross was well entrenched as lead singer. Ironically, a voice such as Ballard's would have fit in well with the soul movement that Aretha Franklin and Atlantic Records and Otis Redding and Stax Records represented. In spite of all the talk of "family" at Motown over the years, Berry Gordy made business decisions based on his rules, and, by complaining, talking back, gaining weight, sinking into depression and developing a drinking problem, Florence Ballard had broken them. In Gordy's eyes, she was an unmannered girl who no longer would be seen and not heard. By the time Gordy fired her from the group, the two remaining members of the group would not speak in her support. Her rebellion did not earn her renewed attention, nor respect from her peers. Instead, she became more and more isolated. Since Gordy had made her visible, he quickly made her invisible. As per the middle class values ingrained in the Gordys, the Motown family saw Ballard's deviant behavior as a threat to the enterprise as a whole. However, the sense of respectability she carried was still intact, because that came through her upbringing. Unlike the elegant white gloves worn by the Supremes, Berry Gordy, Jr. bestowed neither talent nor respectability upon Florence Ballard, though he may have tried to strip her of both.<sup>461</sup>

In its early years of Motown, many aspects of the company led the public and Motown employees to believe the Gordy family's hyperbole that Motown was a diverse family business.

On the surface, the company initially looked like one. Raynoma Liles Gordy headed Jobete publishing, and Berry's sister Esther Gordy Edwards became vice-president in charge of ITMI. Her husband and Michigan State Legislator, George Edwards, became the company's first comptroller. Berry's father joined the fold as a Motown consultant. Gordy's sister Loucye Wakefield often stepped in to take care of accounting and other Motown business.<sup>462</sup> Gwen and Anna Gordy contributed to the company through marriage. Gwen, the co-owner of Anna Records, married Harvey Fuqua, who became head of record promotion. Anna married Marvin Gaye, who went on to be one of Motown's top stars. Berry Gordy Jr. had no apprehensions about hiring white employees either as long as they fit into the business of selling records. Barney Ales, vice president in charge of distribution, is one example of an experienced music businessman and a friend of Gordy who Gordy brought to Motown because Ales could better sell Motown records to distributors, most of whom were white. Ales, however, stayed on at Motown long after he no longer dealt directly with distributors.<sup>463</sup>

There are numerous positive references by Motown artists to the family atmosphere at Motown Records, but not all are flattering. Apparently, the family could be both invigorating and suffocating, depending on the perspective of the individual artists. Loyalists like Smokey Robinson, Martha Reeves and Levi Stubbs reminisce about the togetherness and all-for-one attitude of Motown artists. Stubbs, of the Four Tops, remarks, "[W]ith Motown people, we were like a big family really – we were our greatest fans."<sup>464</sup> Martha Reeves, squarely in the loyalist camp as per her autobiography, still criticized the Motown of the late 1960s: ". . . the bigger the family got, the harder the times got."<sup>465</sup> Then there were those who fell out with the family and left, feeling ignored, shunned, and abandoned, such as the Marvelettes, Mary Wells, and Florence Ballard. Mary Wells, who denied that her idea to leave Motown had anything to do

with money, said she was having problems at Motown because she believed in the family, and she felt that she was being abandoned: “You don’t tell people it’s a family business and you are family, and then you’re left out. I was hurt.”<sup>466</sup> The Motown family, patriarchal, dictatorial, and capitalistic at its roots, apparently had to produce orphans and malcontents so that Gordy could feel the full extent of his power. In the early years, the company orphaned women more often than the company orphaned men.

“The Sound of Young America” came from a young label with innovative ideas, and Motown depended on youth to sell its products. However, it is not clear whether the label used youth for its appeal to fellow teenagers as well as older generations in the 1960s, or if Gordy, who was twenty-nine when he started his business, focused on youth because it could somewhat easily be exploited, manipulated and controlled. The careers of the Supremes, Martha and the Vandellas, the Marvelettes, and Mary Wells reveal how Motown deskilled and reshaped some of its female artists in order to obtain crossover success. Motown had total control of the women’s careers. Providing them with songs, producers, managers, accountants, teachers, booking agents, and financial advisors, Motown encompassed, and sometimes stifled, the careers and lives of its “children.” Ironically, considering Gordy’s achievements as a self-made black businessman, Motown frowned upon self-accomplishment in others. Gordy desired to take credit for “making” stars.

Granted, Gordy supplied artists aspiring to be stars with machinery and skills needed to make hit records and to achieve fame that they did not otherwise possess, but they arrived at Motown with talents developed on their own. Otherwise, record label officials would not have given them contracts. This becomes clear by looking at what were in effect the “successive” careers of the Marvelettes, Mary Wells, Martha and the Vandellas and the Supremes, in terms of

the time that the Motown spotlight shined on them, Gordy lighted on one group at a time before he pulled his attention away and turned to the next potential hit maker. Eventually, his attentions landed on the Supremes, the ultimate girl group that not only could produce hit after hit but also had mass appeal beyond anyone's expectations. The Supremes success, however, came with no small bit of homogenization, suffering, and quibbling. By sifting out all of the rough edges, including Florence Ballard, and breaking the group down to build it back up, Gordy was able to "make" his dream group, and watch it fulfill his dreams. Mary Wells and the other groups were marketing "flings" that he promoted, soon abandoned, and ultimately left to their own devices at Motown.

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<sup>278</sup> "Motown brought in a slick new pop sound that captured America. And the blues was seen as a primitive part of Americana." Keith A. Owens, "The History of Detroit Blues from Black Bottom to Belle Isle: Hastings Street Breakdown, pt. I *Metro Times* (Detroit), 26 July-1 August 2000, 22.

<sup>279</sup> Northern Soul, which emerged from the British mod scene of the late 1960s, initially in Northern England, consists of "a particular style of black American soul music based on the heavy beat and fast tempo of the Tamla Motown sound." The term "Northern" refers to Northern England and not the Northern United States. "Northern Soul." <http://www.northernsoul.net/>, accessed 7 May 2011.

<sup>280</sup> Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 2.

<sup>281</sup> Interview with Levi Stubbs, 26 August 1982, Nelson George Collection, Box 4, Folder 19, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Smith Research Center, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. Interview with Smokey Robinson 28 April 1981, Nelson George Collection, Box 10, Folder 23, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Smith Research Center, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. Martha Reeves with Mark Bego, *Dancing in the Street: Confessions of a Motown Diva* (New York: Hyperion), 96.

<sup>282</sup> Kingsley Abbot, ed., *Callin' Out Around the World: A Motown Reader* (London: Helter Skelter Publications, 2000), 151. Peter Benjaminson, *The Lost Supreme: The Life of Dreamgirl Florence Ballard* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2008), 100.

<sup>283</sup> Lawrence N. Redd, "Rock! It's Still Rhythm and Blues," *The Black Perspective in Music* 13 (Spring, 1985): 32.

<sup>284</sup> Suzanne Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 7.

<sup>285</sup> No one, including *Billboard Magazine*, the white media, nor the black media, challenged the large record companies "when they claimed in 1957 that rock 'n' roll was a 'distinct idiom' with 'its own share of new chart artists' . . . 'race music,' this time rhythm 'n' blues was once again segregated. The general consensus was that rock 'n' roll is something vastly different from rhythm 'n' blues." Redd, "Rock! It's Still Rhythm and Blues," 42.

<sup>286</sup> Redd, "Rock! It's Still Rhythm and Blues," 31.

<sup>287</sup> “When I speak of soul music I am not referring to Motown, a phenomenon contemporary but appealing to a pop, white, and industry-slanted type of audience.” Guralnick also quotes Atlantic label co-president Jerry Wexler, saying in reference to Motown, “They took black music and beamed it directly at the white, American teenager.” Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 1-2.

<sup>288</sup> Gerald Early, *One Nation Under a Groove: Motown and American Culture*, revised and expanded edition (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2004), 84.

<sup>289</sup> Early, *One Nation Under a Groove*, 81-82.

<sup>290</sup> Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 54-55.

<sup>291</sup> Nelson George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound: Where Did Our Love Go?* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 214.

<sup>292</sup> According to Gerald Early, Frantic Ernie Durham of WCHB in Detroit was crucial to Motown’s early successes. KLJB disc jockey said, “If it were not for the black disc jockeys, there would have been no Motown . . . And the black disc jockeys helped Motown get its sound across to white stations. The black disc jockeys were very instrumental and Berry knew this and treated us accordingly.” Early, *One Nation Under a Groove*, 111.

<sup>293</sup> Kerry Segrave, *Payola in the Music Industry: A History, 1880-1991* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1994), 97.

<sup>294</sup> Peter Benjaminson, *The Story of Motown* (New York: Grove Press, 1979), 51 fn.

<sup>295</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 83.

<sup>296</sup> Raynoma Gordy Singleton, *The Untold Story: Berry, Me and Motown* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1990), 110.

<sup>297</sup> For a discussion on soul music, see George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 127-128

<sup>298</sup> Early, *One Nation Under a Groove*, 84.

<sup>299</sup> Smokey Robinson interview, 1987, Nelson George Collection, Box 1, Folder 5, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Smith Research Center, Illinois University, Bloomington, Indiana.

<sup>300</sup> Abbot., *Callin’ Out Around the World*, 151.

<sup>301</sup> Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 14. Kevin Phinney, *Souled American: How Black Music Transformed White Culture* (New York: Billboard Books, 2005), 190.

<sup>302</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 28.

<sup>303</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 21.

<sup>304</sup> Gordy Singleton, *The Untold Story*, 52, 104.

<sup>305</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 31.

<sup>306</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 28.

<sup>307</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 28.

<sup>308</sup> There were some men at the label, such as Smokey Robinson and Marvin Gaye, to whom these rules did not apply. However, these men stood within the highest echelons of the Motown hierarchy. William “Smokey” Robinson was the vice president of Motown and Marvin Gay married into the Gordy family when he wed Anna Gordy. These relationships also hint at the different treatment that some male and almost all female artists received at the label. George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 32.

<sup>309</sup> Marc Taylor, *The Original Marvelettes: Motown’s Mystery Girl Group* (Jamaica, NY: Aloiv Publishing, 2004), 27.

<sup>310</sup> Gordy Singleton, *The Untold Story*, 110.

<sup>311</sup> Harold Keith Taylor, *The Motown Music Machine: A Candid Look at Motown’s Success Formula* (United States of America: Jadmeg Music, 2003), 135.

<sup>312</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 28.

<sup>313</sup> Susan Whitall, *The Women of Motown: an Oral History* (New York: Avon Books, 1998), 39.

<sup>314</sup> Whitall, *The Women of Motown*, xiv.

<sup>315</sup> Whitall, *The Women of Motown*, 100.

<sup>316</sup> Whitall, *The Women of Motown*, 101.

<sup>317</sup> Smokey Robinson interview, 1987, Nelson George Collection, Box 1, Folder 5.

<sup>318</sup> Smokey Robinson interview, 1987, Nelson George Collection, Box 1, Folder 5.

<sup>319</sup> Gladys Knight interview, 2 June 1983, Box 7, Folder 15, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Smith Research Center, Illinois University, Bloomington, Indiana.

<sup>320</sup> The Artist Development Department began in 1964 when Maxine Powell became a Motown employee based on an endorsement from Gwen Gordy. Powell, who had owned and operated a finishing and modeling school in Detroit, taught Motown artists everything from comportment to interviewee skills. By 1965, Artists Development expanded to include Cholly Atkins, who taught “vocal choreography,” Maurice King, who served as musical

director, with arrangers working under him. “All were essential in making Artist Development into an all-encompassing, Hollywood studio-inspired image machine.” George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 87-90.

<sup>321</sup> Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 14

<sup>322</sup> Early, *One Nation Under a Groove*, 140.

<sup>323</sup> Mark Ribowsky, *The Supremes: A Saga of Motown Dreams, Success, and Betrayal* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009), 169.

<sup>324</sup> Early, *One Nation Under a Groove*, 117.

<sup>325</sup> Taylor, *The Original Marvelettes*, 19.

<sup>326</sup> Taylor, *The Original Marvelettes*, 13-24.

<sup>327</sup> Taylor, *The Original Marvelettes*, 19-20, 26.

<sup>328</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 29.

<sup>329</sup> Taylor, *The Original Marvelettes*, 30.

<sup>330</sup> Since Berry Gordy Jr. did not allow the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), the organization that certifies gold records, access to his books, it became a moot point. His refusal to join the RIAA related to his reluctance to let anyone outside of his recording artists see the Motown books. For the purpose of royalty payments, Motown allowed its artists to see books twice a year. Motown allowed no regulatory agency like the RIAA to audit the books. None of the Motown hits were certified gold for this reason. George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 29.

<sup>331</sup> Taylor, *The Original Marvelettes*, 36.

<sup>332</sup> Marc Taylor, *The Original Marvelettes*, 91.

<sup>333</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 83.

<sup>334</sup> In the music industry, a “producer” can be responsible for everything from procuring a recording artist to writing and arranging material to engineering a recording session. At Motown, Berry Gordy gave producers plenty of leeway to test their own songs on a number of artists to determine which artists best performed a song.

<sup>335</sup> “Instead of saying ‘Inkster is 30 miles outside of Detroit,’ she said ‘Detroit is 30 miles outside of Inkster’ . . . she looked at it as if it were the biggest mistake she ever made . . .” Taylor, *The Original Marvelettes*, 55.

<sup>336</sup> Taylor, *The Original Marvelettes*, 103.

<sup>337</sup> Taylor, *The Original Marvelettes*, 126-127.

<sup>338</sup> Taylor, *The Original Marvelettes*, 126-127.

<sup>339</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound: Where Did Our Love Go?* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 84.

<sup>340</sup> Taylor, *The Original Marvelettes*, 119-122.

<sup>341</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 87.

<sup>342</sup> Interview with Harvey Fuqua, Nelson George Collection, Box 1, Folder 5, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Smith Research Center, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

<sup>343</sup> Interview with Beans Bowles, Nelson George Collection, Box 1, Folder 3, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Smith Research Center, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

<sup>344</sup> Taylor, *The Original Marvelettes*, 128-129.

<sup>345</sup> Jacqueline Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture: Popular Music and Identity in the 1960s* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 49.

<sup>346</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 216-217.

<sup>347</sup> Taylor, *The Original Marvelettes*, 143-144.

<sup>348</sup> “Don’t Mess With Bill” reached number seven on the Billboard pop chart and number three on the magazine’s rhythm-and-blues-chart, “The Hunter Gets Captured By The Game” reached number thirteen on the pop chart and number two on the rhythm-and-blues chart, and “My Baby Must Be A Magician” reached number seventeen on the pop chart and number eight on the rhythm-and-blues chart. George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 216-217.

<sup>349</sup> Smokey Robinson interview, 1987, Nelson George Collection, Box 1, Folder 5,

<sup>350</sup> Reeves *Dancing in the Street*, 176.

<sup>351</sup> Taylor, *The Original Marvelettes*, 18.

<sup>352</sup> Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture*, 49.

<sup>353</sup> Taylor, *The Original Marvelettes*, 42-43.

<sup>354</sup> Taylor, *The Original Marvelettes*, 208-209.



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- <sup>355</sup> Patrick and Barbara Salvo, “America’s Biggest Black Business: The Motown Empire,” *Sepia*, July to December, 1974, 44.
- <sup>356</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 170.
- <sup>357</sup> Wells v Motown Record Corporation, 32563 Wayne, Co. MI 45 (1964). Box 3, Folder 29, Nelson George Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Smith Research Center, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.
- <sup>358</sup> Wells v Motown Record Corporation, 32563 Wayne, Co. MI 45 (1964). Box 3, Folder 29, Nelson George Collection...
- <sup>359</sup> Wells v Motown Record Corporation, 32563 Wayne Co. MI 18 (1964). Box 3, Folder 29, Nelson George Collection.
- <sup>360</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 77-78.
- <sup>361</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 86.
- <sup>362</sup> Wells v Motown Record Corporation, 32563 Wayne, Co. MI 45 (1964). Box 3, Folder 29, Nelson George Collection.
- <sup>363</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 87.
- <sup>364</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 78.
- <sup>365</sup> Wells v Motown Record Corporation, 32563 Wayne, Co. MI 45 (1964). Box 3, Folder 29, Nelson George Collection.
- <sup>366</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 78.
- <sup>367</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 79.
- <sup>368</sup> Reeves, *Confessions of a Motown Diva*, 13-17.
- <sup>369</sup> Reeves, *Confessions of a Motown Diva*, 34-44.
- <sup>370</sup> Gordy Singleton, *The Untold Story*, 111.
- <sup>371</sup> Reeves, *Confessions of a Motown Diva*, 45.
- <sup>372</sup> Reeves, *Confessions of a Motown Diva*, 52.
- <sup>373</sup> Reeves, *Dancing in the Street*, 62.
- <sup>374</sup> Whitall, *The Women of Motown*, 39.
- <sup>375</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 150-154.
- <sup>376</sup> Reeves, *Confessions of a Motown Diva*, 65.
- <sup>377</sup> Reeves, *Confessions of a Motown Diva*, 259-260.
- <sup>378</sup> Reeves, *Confessions of a Motown Diva* (New York: Hyperion), 66.
- <sup>379</sup> Patrick and Barbara Salvo, “America’s Biggest Black Business: The Motown Empire,” 41.
- <sup>380</sup> The “template” reference is from David Brackett, *The Pop, Rock and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 144. “The driving baritone sax riffs and the clever subliminal use of Dave Hamilton’s vibes in tandem with the piano add vibrant highs to the track and foreshadow Motown’s future sound.” George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 75.
- <sup>381</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 75.
- <sup>382</sup> According to Robinson, “[I]t just so happens that Berry Gordy was in Detroit and he started Motown Records and Motown Records started to go great guns, which gave the talent in Detroit an outlet.” Smokey Robinson interview, 1981, Nelson George Collection, Box 1, Folder 5, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Smith Research Center, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.
- <sup>383</sup> Early, *One Nation Under a Groove*, 76.
- <sup>384</sup> Early, *One Nation Under a Groove*, 78.
- <sup>385</sup> In the early days, the three major groups of the company – the Supremes, the Temptations and the Miracles – were put together and rehearsed at their high schools. They were not church groups; in fact, the members did not attend the same church, and in various biographies there is little talk about the influence of the black church in their music. Early, *One Nation Under a Groove*, 77.
- <sup>386</sup> Taylor, *The Original Marvelettes*, 7. Whitall, *The Women of Motown*, 53.
- <sup>387</sup> “Thanks to Detroit’s Own Music Man: Many Superstars got their first Big Break at Northeastern,” Bryan T. McMahon, *Detroit News*, 21 June 1974.
- <sup>388</sup> Wilson, *Dreamgirl and Supreme Faith*, 44.
- <sup>389</sup> Benjaminson, *The Story of Motown*, 18.
- <sup>391</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 45.
- <sup>392</sup> Reeves, *Confessions of a Motown Diva*, 79.

- <sup>393</sup> Since the bulk of proceeds from performances were sent to ITM in Detroit until the performers returned to Detroit following the tour, the tour was notable in a business sense. Motown became “the first record label in history to tap directly into the income generated by its entire roster and to invest, in many cases at a loss, in building its artists’ marketability.” George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 45.
- <sup>394</sup> Early, *One Nation Under a Groove*, 104.
- <sup>395</sup> Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 124.
- <sup>396</sup> Taylor, *The Original Marvelettes*, 7. Whitall, *The Women of Motown*, 62-69.
- <sup>397</sup> Taylor, *The Original Marvelettes*, 97-99.
- <sup>398</sup> McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street*, 155.
- <sup>399</sup> Susan Whitall, *The Women of Motown*, 56.
- <sup>400</sup> Reeves, *Confessions of a Motown Diva*, 74.
- <sup>401</sup> Reeves, *Confessions of a Motown Diva*, 69.
- <sup>402</sup> Beans Bowles interview, n.d., Nelson George Collection, Box 1, Folder 3.
- <sup>403</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 47.
- <sup>404</sup> Whitall, *The Women of Motown*, 97.
- <sup>405</sup> Whitall, *The Women of Motown*, 69.
- <sup>406</sup> Wilson, *Dreamgirl and Supreme Faith*, 24.
- <sup>407</sup> Wilson, *Dreamgirl and Supreme Faith*, 25.
- <sup>408</sup> Abbot, *Callin’ Out Around the World*, 182.
- <sup>409</sup> Wilson, *Dreamgirl and Supreme Faith*, 34.
- <sup>410</sup> Wilson, *Dreamgirl and Supreme Faith*, 38.
- <sup>411</sup> Wilson, *Dreamgirl and Supreme Faith*, 25.
- <sup>412</sup> Gordy Singleton, *The Untold Story*, 112.
- <sup>413</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 82.
- <sup>414</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 86.
- <sup>415</sup> Benjaminson, *The Lost Supreme*, 32.
- <sup>416</sup> Abbot, *Callin’ Out Around the World*, 182.
- <sup>417</sup> Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture*, 159.
- <sup>418</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 82.
- <sup>419</sup> Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 7.
- <sup>420</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 216-217.
- <sup>421</sup> In the years of 1963 to 1965 record companies succeeded in crossing-over so many times that Billboard Magazine discontinued its rhythm-and-blues charts for those years, but segregation in the charts subsided only temporarily. Arnold Shaw, *Honkers and Shouters* (New York: Collier, 1978), 525.
- <sup>422</sup> Phinney, *Souled American*, 193.
- <sup>423</sup> Phinney, *Souled American*, 191.
- <sup>424</sup> Phinney, *Souled American*, 192.
- <sup>425</sup> Phinney, *Souled American*, 191.
- <sup>426</sup> Three hundred and four Motown songs hit the charts from 1962 to 1971. George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 203-237.
- <sup>427</sup> Phinney, *Souled American*, 192.
- <sup>428</sup> Patrick and Barbara Salvo, “America’s Biggest Black Business,” 41.
- <sup>429</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 224-226.
- <sup>430</sup> “The Andrews Sisters,” <http://www.cmgww.com/music/andrews/about/bio3.htm>, accessed 7 May 2011.
- <sup>431</sup> Their 1965 set at the Copa included Broadway and Tin Pan Alley standards such as “Put on a Happy Face,” “Rock a Bye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody,” and “You’re Nobody ‘Til Somebody Loves You.” Liner Notes, album discography, Diana Ross 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary (Los Angeles: Motown Records, 1986), 8.
- <sup>432</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 82.
- <sup>433</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 88.
- <sup>434</sup> Gordy said that he believed that promoting the Supremes above all others beginning in 1964 would eventually benefit the rest of the Motown artists. “I saw the Supremes as vehicle to lead Motown to a whole new world of music, and appreciation of our music.” Early, *One Nation Under a Groove*, 161-162.
- <sup>435</sup> Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture*, 63. Wilson, *Dreamgirl and Supreme Faith*, 151.
- <sup>436</sup> Wilson, *Dreamgirl and Supreme Faith*, 151.

- <sup>437</sup> Early, *One Nation Under a Groove*, 117.
- <sup>438</sup> Early, *One Nation Under a Groove*, 117.
- <sup>439</sup> Early, *One Nation Under a Groove*, 58-59.
- <sup>440</sup> Whitall, *The Women of Motown*, 82.
- <sup>441</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 81. It has also been confirmed by Motown employees that Gordy was having an affair with Ross throughout this period, and that the fact that Gordy and Ross were lovers may have led to Gordy's decision to make Ross the lead singer of the group. Interview with Thomas "Beans" Bowles, Nelson George Collection, box 1, folder 3, Archives of African-American Music and Culture, Smith Research Center, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.
- <sup>442</sup> Reeves *Confessions of a Motown Diva*, 159.
- <sup>443</sup> Early, *One Nation Under a Groove*, 102.
- <sup>444</sup> Early, *One Nation Under a Groove*, 161-162. Reeves, *Confessions of a Motown Diva*, 162.
- <sup>445</sup> Berry Gordy, *To Be Loved: The Music, the Magic, the Memories of Motown* (New York: Warner Books, 1994), 229-230.
- <sup>446</sup> For the Supremes complete itinerary from 1961 to 1970 see Wilson, *Dreamgirl and Supreme Faith*, 251-277.
- <sup>447</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 87.
- <sup>448</sup> Ribowsky, *The Supremes*, 326-327.
- <sup>449</sup> Ribowsky, *The Supremes*, 349-350.
- <sup>450</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 54.
- <sup>451</sup> "Radical Motown," <http://www.redpepper.org.uk/Radical-Motown/>, accessed 14 May 2011.
- <sup>452</sup> Early, *One Nation Under a Groove*, 118.
- <sup>453</sup> The story differs in two different accounts. Benjaminson says Gordy took the song from Florence and gave it to Diana at the Copacabana. Ribowsky's account differs. He writes that the incident occurred at the Copacabana and that Gordy simply removed the song from the set. He also reports that Ballard blamed Ross for Gordy's actions. Benjaminson, *The Lost Supreme*, 76; Ribowsky, *The Supremes*, 224-226.
- <sup>454</sup> Ribowsky, *The Supremes*, 224-226.
- <sup>455</sup> In her onstage patter, Ross referred to Ballard as "the fat one. Ballard's response: "Yeah, but fat is where it's at." Mary Wilson, *Dreamgirl and Supreme Faith*, 195; Benjaminson, *The Lost Supreme*, 80-81.
- <sup>456</sup> Cindy Birdsong had been a member of Patti Labelle and the Blue-Belles. Wilson, *Dreamgirl and Supreme Faith*, 197-200.
- <sup>457</sup> Early, *One Nation Under a Groove*, 118. Wilson, *Dreamgirl and Supreme Faith*, 189.
- <sup>458</sup> Nine years after she left Motown, Florence Ballard died in Detroit at the age of 32-years-old. Florence Ballard died in 1976 at Mt. Carmel Mercy Hospital in Detroit at the age of thirty-two years old. Coronary artery thrombosis caused her death, but what killed Florence, according to her, was a combination of heart disease, a blood clot, hypertension and obesity. At five-foot seven-inches, she weighed 195 pounds. Benjaminson, *The Lost Supreme*, 168-169.
- <sup>459</sup> Wilson, *Dreamgirl and Supreme Faith*, 28-29.
- <sup>460</sup> Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture*, 159.
- <sup>461</sup> Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 241.
- <sup>462</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 87.
- <sup>463</sup> George, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, 27-39.
- <sup>464</sup> Interview with Levi Stubbs, 26 August 1982, Nelson George Collection, Box 4, Folder 19. Interview with Smokey Robinson, 28 April 1981, Nelson George Collection, Box 10, Folder 23. Reeves, *Confessions of a Motown Diva*, 96.
- <sup>465</sup> *Detroit News*, "Martha Reeves," 3 January 1988.
- <sup>466</sup> Abbot, *Callin' Out Around the World*, 151.

## Chapter Four

## Expanding the Blues: Four Modern Detroit Blues Women--Their Music, the Spirit, and the City

This chapter examines several aspects of performance relating to Thornetta Davis, Loretha Tobar (Lady T), Cathy Davis, and Cheryl “Cee Cee” Collins, four women who began in Detroit blues in the 1990s during the decade’s blues revival. The women represent a style of blues best described as modern blues, which is not the “pure” or “traditional” strain of blues music preferred by many blues aficionados. Modern blues denotes a blues presentation supported by elements of rhythm-and-blues, rock-and-roll, soul, and funk music, all of which Cathy Davis described as “variety.”<sup>467</sup> Like the blues women who predated them, most of the women interviewed also wrote songs, and their songwriting, utilized in both live and recorded performance, made use of some of the blues-derived musical genres listed above. As interpreters of the work of others, the women also chose material that sometimes veered outside the boundaries of the blues genre and into the blues-derived genres of soul, rhythm-and-blues, funk and rock-and-roll.

As has been argued throughout this work, blues music mothered the blues-derived genres. In turn, blues-derived genres then dovetailed back into blues performance so that “living” blues performances of these women, some of whom began performing publicly in the 1980s, attracted racially integrated audiences, whereas the “old” or “traditional” blues music had captivated predominantly white audiences beginning in the 1950s.<sup>468</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s, many African Americans dismissed blues music for its irrelevance, its depressing nature, its backwardness, and its alleged accommodation to white values. Meanwhile, American electric blues men, promoted by British rock-and-roll-bands that played their music, earned more than they ever had before by

playing for predominantly white rock-and-rollers.<sup>469</sup> This racial shift of the blues audience occurred before the modern blues women had ever appeared on a stage, and stood as one reason why the modern blues women had less impact on African American culture than did the 1920s blues queens. The 1920s blues women captured the imagination of the black working class in that decade, when blues music became a commercial success and an extremely popular genre of music in black, working-class communities. Despite their lack of commerciality, modern day blues women have nevertheless maintained the vitality, the urgency, the authenticity, and the spirituality that was so powerfully present in the music and performance of the 1920s blues women.

Each of the four Detroit blues women interviewed for this chapter has retained many of the traits commonly attributed to the 1920s blues queens, including independence, self-reliance, self-affirmation, and sensuality. These modern blues singers also share with the blues women of the past an inclination to sing about sexual relations from a woman's perspective. Scholars Angela Y. Davis, Hazel V. Carby, and Daphne Duval Harrison have explored all of these issues in their seminal work on blues women of the 1920s. Davis has successfully placed Billie Holiday, who many thought to be a jazz singer, in what she terms the "blues tradition" as well as within an African American tradition of blues women that commenced on a commercial level in the 1920s with the likes of Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Sippie Wallace. The latter were just a few of many highly successful African American female vocalists who succeeded in the 1920s blues boom. All of the above scholars have provided new and different ways of historicizing and analyzing the blues women of the past from the perspectives of race, class, and, most particularly, gender. However, they have not taken into account the modern blues women of recent decades who share many of the qualities possessed by the blues women of the past.

The modern blues women have also made viable the continuance of a blues women tradition spanning from the 1920s through the first decade of the twenty-first century. Davis's, Carby's and Harrison's arguments for the presence in the music of blues women past of a "women's blues" different from the male genre are also generally supported by the work of the modern blues women.

One difference between blues women of the past and the modern blues women is that modern blues women sang out of a much different socio-historical context from their 1920s predecessors. As the first popular interpreters of blues music, the 1920s blues women participated in and chronicled the upheaval and monumental change of the Great Migration. For the modern blues women, the need to act as go-betweens for African Americans traversing between the South and the North and the rural and the urban has vanished. However, the modern blues women's belief that women's blues music concerned itself with freedom and focused on human relationships corroborates Davis's assertion that women's blues songs of the past contained pronounced representations of love and sexuality that represented "coded yearnings" for freedom and liberation.<sup>470</sup> Harrison, echoing Carby and Davis, emphasizes the independence, self-reliance, and the tendency toward self-affirmation, as well as the sensuality, and the extraordinary presence demonstrated by many of the 1920s blues women. These modern blues women share many of those qualities.<sup>471</sup> Most of these modern blues women "traveled" toward the idea of becoming blues singers after beginning their careers as rhythm-and-blues, soul, and funk singers, thus taking part in kind of a musical migration. Within that metaphorical migration, they have been influenced by blues music, but the women also have reinterpreted that music and revitalized it through performing a hybrid blues music that reincorporates other blues-derived black musical genres yet again. The blues women of the 1920s, who blended blues

music with jazz and vaudeville instrumentation, and sometimes relied on both black and white Tin Pan Alley songwriters, created their own hybrid of blues music.

Blues music has gone through many changes and transformation since the 1920s when female performers established through the medium of vaudeville their version of the genre. However, even in the midst of the blues queen phenomenon, blues women were losing their commercial grip on the music as white-owned and profit-driven record companies were turning their attention toward blues men. By the mid 1920s, and with continued migration of southern African Americans to the North, some of the record companies with race records divisions started to sign and promote black, male, and rural blues artists, who had become popular in the South and performed blues later categorized as “country-” and “Delta-” blues. Unlike the 1920s blues women, who often required the support of many musicians and held some degree of bargaining power due to their popular appeal, the rural blues men generally performed and recorded alone and were often ruthlessly cheated by the music businessmen.<sup>472</sup>

Contradicting concerns regarding black male performers expressed early on in the black blues craze by men such as Perry Bradford, who deliberately chose a woman to “break” the blues into the world of popular music, record company decisions to put male artists under contract made sense at that point in time for a number of reasons. First, with continuing African American migration from South to North, there was an increasing demand for southern authenticity in blues music to which the record companies began responding in 1923 by signing southern women such as Bessie Smith, Sippie Wallace and Ma Rainey. Signing the southern blues men, already well established in the South, shortly thereafter made sense for record companies that were trying to meet the demand for southern authenticity. Secondly, record companies had eliminated the threat to white people that black male blues artists might represent

by removing white blues audiences from the equation. They did this by segregating the music industry in the early 1920s and establishing race records divisions that marketed and distributed black music solely to black audiences. A major force in the blues music market by the end of the decade, men continued to dominate blues music performance through the eras of swing and jump blues, two permutations of blues music that attained popularity in the 1930s and 1940s and ultimately provided the basis for rhythm-and-blues and rock-and-roll. Within the contexts of these “new” blues-derived forms of music, and with few exceptions, male performers continued to hold sway in the black music market.

In *Blues People: White Music in Negro America*, Amiri Baraka writes that changes in the ways African Americans thought about the world and changes in African Americans themselves accounted for changes in black music, which Baraka said transformed itself from time to time owing to a dialectic formed between African Americans and black music.<sup>473</sup> Blues music also formed a dialectical relationship with its musical offspring, providing the foundations of new musical styles as well as finding replenishment in the musical genres it helped to produce.

By fusing blues music with its other musical children more than fifty years after blues music became established, these modern blues women, who began their singing careers in black blues-derived musical genres and only later began performing blues music, helped the blues retain its vitality. Paradoxically, the blues of some of the modern day Detroit blues women, who incorporated into their music all types of blues-derived genres, still managed to present an authentic blues music. They presented the music to an audience that was not the black working-class audience that the 1920s blues queens captivated, but an integrated audience, perhaps dominated by whites depending to some degree on whether performances occurred in the city or the suburbs.



With many from the South, the 1920s blues queens had maintained a strong presence in black working-class culture of their time, and they performed to and sold records to a black audience, all of which lent them a certain realness or authenticity in the eyes of their followers and supporters.<sup>474</sup> However, white, male blues scholars later called the “authenticity” of the blues women into question because of their associations with vaudeville and their reliance on jazz bands for musical support. Also criticized for their use of Tin Pan Alley songwriters, and their use or overuse of sexual innuendo in their songs (which caused some critics to accuse them of purveying “novelty songs”), the women were effectively demoted into the realm of inauthenticity by these scholars in their literature on blues music.<sup>475</sup> However, their authenticity lies in qualities other than the elusive “pure” blues music that many scholars seek to define. Blues music itself originated at some point in the late nineteenth century out of a patchwork of nineteenth-century styles of music, and was somewhat of a hybrid to begin with. As one of their achievements, the early blues women helped to successfully transplant a rural music into an urban setting. To do so, they had to fuse elements from urban life, such as jazz and vaudeville bands and even some of the city’s tawdriness, with the trappings of the Southern countryside, such as guitar and banjo instrumentation, the sense of existential aloneness attributed to the wandering minstrel, and finally the longing for freedom.

The authenticity of the blues women lay in their ability to invoke a sense of personal freedom bolstered by an unbound yet controlled sexuality. Whether or not this was true freedom or a representation of freedom, the blues women conveyed it to their black, working-class audiences, who were searching for freedom down paths similar to those of the blues women. Many of them wrote their own songs and employed black musicians to perform them. Their bawdiness, their sexually suggestive songs, and their overt sexuality could have been self-

exploitative, a burlesque for the audience, or acted out according to the wishes of a behind-the-scenes exploiter. However, despite whether exploitation existed for either the performers or the audiences, a blues woman's performance could represent a movement toward liberation and reclamation of one's body that could inspire other women, and men. For the 1920s blues women, revealing their own idea of sexuality became another signifier of authenticity, and represented the transformation of a sexual object into a sexual subject—the becoming of a more authentic, less-oppressed human being.

The modern blues women worked authenticity into the blues in radically different ways than the original blues queens did because they found themselves in a radically different social context, or blues milieu. The emergence of the musical genres engendered by the blues had expanded the musical palette available to create a blues song. Ever since a sizable amount of white middle-class blues music fans and entrepreneurs delved into the blues in the 1960s, audiences no longer consisted primarily of the black working class.<sup>476</sup> By the time the modern blues women in Detroit began performing blues in the 1990s, white fans were a major presence in blues audiences. Besides changes in the music, and the race and class composition of the audience for blues music, the context of gender relations and perceptions in the 1990s were presumably different from those of the 1920s. Apart from personal actions that can serve to make a “rebel” in any day and age, ranging from nonconformity to lawlessness, blues women were not the “cultural rebels” that their predecessors had been solely for singing blues music and being sexually assertive.<sup>477</sup> More occupations opened to African American women, so the 1920s view that saw employment in show business as one of the few alternatives to domestic work had become less tenable. In terms of blues music, the modern blues women performed an updated, hybrid blues music to a different audience. There was no Great Migration, or shift from the rural

to the urban—this time, the music and audience changed. The modern Detroit blues women performed a different blues than their predecessors had and their connection with their audiences explored different issues of gender and African American life that sprang from a new socio-historical context. All of the women had been involved in performing genres of black music other than the blues prior to becoming blues singers. Putting musical genres in historical perspective, all of the women, as African Americans, “returned” to blues music. In a sense, the musical migration of these four women took the place of the Great Migration, which was not only a physical transference but also transference of ideas. For the modern blues women, who performed to black and white audiences of all classes, this transference took place on levels of race, class, and gender, and held as well a musical retooling of the blues.

The appearance that some of these women did dismiss blues music at one point in their lives only to focus on blues music when they got older raises questions pertaining to their motives in the music business. One could question the depth of their relationships to the blues and the authenticity of the women as blues performers. The timing of the entrance of some of the women into the “revived” Detroit blues scene of the 1990s could lead one to believe that pecuniary and commercial interests may have drawn them to the blues. However, since it was common for members of the black baby boom generation to dismiss the blues as being irrelevant, archaic or too referential to dark periods of African American history in which slavery, sharecropping, and Jim Crow prevailed, it is not surprising that these women bypassed or ignored the blues as young singers.<sup>478</sup> Most of the women never did become traditional, or pure, blues singers. They incorporated multiple genres of music in their performances, and they did not totally reinvent themselves. Nevertheless, they wound up with a blues style of music that was more authentic to modern times, and one that pandered less to the prerogatives of white

blues fans for “old” blues. The Delta blues sound is one of the “old blues” sounds that became entrenched in Detroit blues in the decade of the 1940s, and still dominated Detroit blues in the 1990s.<sup>479</sup>

Partially because of their histories as performers of other genres of black music, the women tended to focus on a more uplifting and upbeat blues than did many of their predecessors. Cathy Davis said she relied on the upbeat songs to inform audience members that she had little, if any, interest in playing sad, lowdown blues. “Uptempo, danceable. I think that’s the variety. Who wants to go and hear the same blues songs over and over again?”<sup>480</sup> Uplifting and upbeat blues has a history that goes back to the swing era, and especially jump blues, the black music phenomenon of the 1940s that developed out of swing. The change in the “mood” of black music attributable to the post-Depression era, and the World War II and postwar years, in which there were advances in civil rights, reflected an optimism absent from the Depression years. In the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s, upbeat, danceable twelve-bar blues songs like Louis Jordan’s “Choo Choo Ch’Boogie” and “Caldonia,” and Lionel Hampton’s “Flying Home” and “Hey Ba Ba Rebo,” a song that Alberta Adams, a contemporary of Hampton’s and Jordan’s, sang frequently, came to the fore.<sup>481</sup> It was jump blues, with its doubled-up beat, that became the basis of rhythm-and-blues.<sup>482</sup> Though different in tempo and in spirit, these songs were not a tremendous alteration of blues music, which relied primarily on the twelve-bar format. Even the most lowdown blues sung by the blues queens of the 1920s, who peppered their blues with tales of deceit, desperation, and death, still held the power to uplift by performances that served as “purgative or aesthetic therapy.”<sup>483</sup> The development of blues music reveals the music’s production of an unbroken chain of blues-derived musical genres that not only fed off the blues but also led these four modern blues women back to the blues, albeit a changed blues. Their

form of blues music was upbeat and uplifting, not without meaning, and often reached out to other women.

All of these women grew up in environments in which music became a part of their lives and their culture, and most of them began their singing careers in rhythm-and-blues and rock-and-roll bands, initially resisting the blues because of its attachment to older generations. The rhythm-and-blues, rock-and-roll, Motown, soul music and funk that were popular when they came of age in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s influenced the women, who range in age from their late forties to about sixty years old. Cee Cee Collins, who initially viewed the blues as music that belonged to her parents' generation and even generations that preceded theirs, recoiled from the blues because she associated it with "old people's" music. Collins began her career in rhythm-and-blues and went on to tour internationally in a Supremes cover band.<sup>484</sup> Cathy Davis, once a member of an Episcopalian choir, said her parents and two siblings actually sang together at the dinner table while she was growing up on the west side of Detroit. She also fell under the influence of Motown, and started out as a member of a Motown-inspired girl group called the Passions, a group that played frequently in Detroit at venues like the 20 Grand in the late sixties. Thornetta Davis, from Detroit's east side, began her career in the mid-eighties in a rhythm-and-blues band called Josh that played locally. She then joined a white rock-and-soul band called the Chisel Brothers, and later sang with rock-and-roll group Big Chief, the group that backed her on her 1995 solo album "Sunday Morning Music." Lady T, born and raised in West Helena, Arkansas, sang in the Greater First Baptist Church choir as a child. She also put together a small gospel group with friends called the Gospel Pearls, and said she listened to blues and country on Helena radio station KFFA-AM while growing up. While Lady T seemed to enjoy the blues and country music as a child, even she cited her major influence at the time to be Aretha Franklin.

While the influences gathered above appear to be eclectic, all of these genres relate to the blues, but most of the women considered blues passé and even obsolete when they began in the music business.

Especially *vis`a vis* their relationships with Detroit's longstanding Queen of the Blues, Alberta Adams, the modern day Detroit blues women became related to past blues traditions, but as artists, the women placed their own stamp on "old" blues.<sup>485</sup> They also expanded the boundaries of a blues performance by forcing those boundaries to contain blues-derived "variety," meaning other genres of black music.<sup>486</sup> The inclusive blues as presented by Detroit's modern blues women was likely to appeal more to black audiences, who held a "much looser understanding of the term blues."<sup>487</sup> When Thornetta Davis described herself as a "funky rock-and-blues diva", she said she was trying to convey to her audience that she had taken the fabric of her past musical incarnations with her and woven them into a blues performance. "Well, I like to do it all and I hope you can hear it all," she said.<sup>488</sup> Cathy Davis, who described the process of sifting songs generally related to musical genres other than the blues into her performance as bringing "variety" to the blues, said that she generally preferred to keep her performance upbeat and to stay away from the "cry in your beer" blues. For Davis, playing the same old blues songs would be tantamount to admitting that blues music was a museum piece that pertained to a historically distant black culture, a culture that African Americans and non-African Americans could only appreciate, collect and exchange from a cultural distance. By making the blues more upbeat, more celebratory, and more joyous, without changing its basic musical form or stripping away their desire to explore the heights and depths of human relationships, these women felt that they were placing blues music in a modern context.

Although sharing with the feminist scholars an impulse to explore blues music's relationship to black culture and its spiritual side, Detroit's modern blues women sought first to entertain their audiences and to improve the moods of fans.<sup>489</sup> These concerns made them no different from the original blues queens, entertainers who considered it a legitimate "job" to present blues music to their working-class audiences despite the tendency of some middle-class writers to classify blues music as an art form and condemnations of blues music that identified it as pathological, obscene and salacious.<sup>490</sup> Like the blues queens of the 1920s, who took on personas, like Ma Rainey's "The Mother of the Blues," and Bessie Smith's "Empress of the Blues," some of the modern blues women carry constructed images of themselves for the stage. Thornetta Davis, with her flashy outfits and throaty vocal delivery, plays "Princess of the Blues." Cathy Davis is the upbeat "hip-shaking mama."<sup>491</sup>

Lady T has become known as the "Lady Cobra of the Blues," and like many of the blues queens of the 1920s, she incorporates a bold sexuality to entertain her audiences. For doing so, she remains open to the above criticisms of blues music, even seven decades later. She makes it clear, though, that her persona is different from her person. "Everything I sing about is not me, but when I sing a particular song, I try to put myself in that character, like an actor," she said. "The Lord knows your heart, and that's the way I make my living—getting out in the alley blues. The raunchy songs are for me."<sup>492</sup> Lady T said a man told her once that she was selling sex, but added that she should not be offended and told her she sang about many things that other people lack the nerve to sing. She said she worked in a physical sexuality to complement the verbal sexuality present in songs such as "Dirty Old Woman," "The Bohawk Grind," and "Bone Me Like You Own Me" into her act slowly, but that she found audience support as she became more

daring. “At first I was a little shy about it,” Lady T said, “but Alberta Adams told me, ‘You got to work that stage. You got to work that crowd, girl.’”

Though hardly more explicit than some of the sexual antics of male performers of rhythm-and-blues and rock-and-roll, Lady T’s brash, powerfully feminine, and liberating physical expression earned her the reputation of being Detroit’s “Dirty Old Woman of the Blues.” “So, if they like it like that, I’m going to keep doing this,” she said. “And if I did something that the crowd didn’t dig, I would stop . . . I wouldn’t do it.”<sup>493</sup> For Lady T, the confidence derived from the flowering of her musical talents has led to a sense of empowerment and self-confidence as well as an apparently uninhibited freedom to celebrate her own sexuality.<sup>494</sup> Angela Y. Davis contends that aesthetic forms of protest in the blues were often indirect.<sup>495</sup> In her performance, through its unabashed depictions of sexuality from a woman’s perspective, Lady T encourages “non-repressive values” that lend themselves to forms of freedom and protest for the performer as well as the audience.<sup>496</sup> Lady T’s exaggerated performance of sexuality, which she claimed was a characterization and not an extension of her true self, initially seemed to concur with an objectified, masculine interpretation of female sexuality. However, it also represented a woman asserting herself in a public arena and defining her own sexual prerogatives and desires and thereby affirming these for women in her audience.

Black music as played and sung by African Americans holds a certain authenticity or “realness” owing to the music’s relationship with black culture.<sup>497</sup> The modern blues women are authentic in the sense that they and their music represent connections to an African American heritage.<sup>498</sup> Their blues style is not one that is rooted only in the past, but one that makes use of their songwriting skills and references blues, jazz and soul artists, such as Koko Taylor, Denise LaSalle, Jeanie Cheatham, Motown and Aretha Franklin. In his *Blues Music in the Sixties: A*



*Story in Black and White*, Ulrich Adelt suggests for both African American listeners and African American performers this “variety” represents listening to “the blues in a larger sense” and hearing blues music embedded into other genres, such as soul and funk. Unlike traditional blues rooted in the past, blues in a “larger sense” has flexible parameters and is open to change. A major change came in the years immediately following World War II in which the predominant blues audience came from the white middle class rather than the black working class.<sup>499</sup> Adelt also argues that white audiences and white blues aficionados have been resistant to change by preferring that forms of the blues, such as “country” blues or Mississippi Delta blues, remain static.<sup>500</sup> Adelt also notes that this demand on the part of white blues aficionados for a safer, depoliticized and older version of the blues occurred in the 1960s just as African American demands for “black power” were on the rise.<sup>501</sup> Adelt argues that this decontextualizing and memorializing of the blues on the part of white audiences, performers, and cultural brokers enabled them to “create a depoliticized and commercially charged blues culture.”<sup>502</sup> By injecting “variety” into the blues, the modern blues women may have diluted the blues, but they also revived the blues by reflecting blues-derived genres of black music back onto blues music. By doing so, they gave it new life. Furthermore, what they are attempting may not be a dilution at all, but an effort to abide by the very spirit of blues music, which instructs its students to allow for flexibility in blues music. As David Grazian writes, “musicians have continually reinvented the blues tradition in order to suit the shifting tastes of their audience.”<sup>503</sup>

The modern blues women also shared with their predecessors a consciousness of the dual nature of blues music, perceivable as pure entertainment but also understood as a very spiritual (in a non-religious sense) and emotionally powerful music. Within a blues song, singers could evoke spiritual feelings through non-religious topics, such as sexual love and human

relationships, as well as the topic of freedom.<sup>504</sup> Some of the women interviewed said blues music had the power to heal. “I knew I felt good when I sang,” Thornetta Davis said, “but I didn’t know I could be part of a healing process until people came to me and said, ‘You made me feel better today.’”<sup>505</sup> In performance, all of the women conveyed a message that transcended entertainment. Whether it was Thornetta Davis’s notion of the healing power of her music, Collins’s intent to bring joy to her audiences, or the “get happy” sexual evangelism of Lady T, these women desired to help others through the medium of blues music as well as to help themselves. The desire to help was also present in Cathy Davis’s wish that other women realize themselves through her performances.<sup>506</sup> Thornetta Davis said her knowledge of her ability to help other with music came with maturity. “I’m an adult now. I’ve grown wiser and I have a gift—something that was given to me for a reason.”<sup>507</sup>

The ability of some of the early blues queens to interpret the blues in a fervent, emotional manner akin to that of a black preacher, a practice known as “preachin’ the blues,” is one reason why some scholars have explored the relationship between the spiritual and the secular in the music of some blues women.<sup>508</sup> Determining that relationship has much to do with one’s concept of what spirituality is, that is, whether one holds an inclusive non-religious view of spirituality that, in the case of women’s blues, can be based on female sexuality and human relationships, or the idea that spirituality represents a human being’s ties to God and religion. Daphne Duval Harrison grasped the former conception of spirituality when she wrote that the 1920s blues queens conveyed their spiritual nature by bringing out in public and exorcizing demons that haunted their female listeners, such as “alienation, sex and sexuality, tortured love, loneliness, hard times, and marginality” as well as their longing for freedom.<sup>509</sup> Jon Michael Spencer, who has done extensive research and writing on the relationship between blues music

and spirituality, sees spirituality in a more religious sense. He argues that the “rural religious residue” that was inherent in blues music before it became urbanized became less and less a feature of blues music as it became urbanized, commercialized and commodified.<sup>510</sup> Thornetta Davis articulated a third way of seeing the relationship between music and spirituality. She said that spirituality was present in the music itself. “There’s a spiritual connection. Blues is spirit. I think music itself is spiritual,” Thornetta said.<sup>511</sup>

Entertainment is not the sole purpose of a modern day blues woman’s performance, and some of the women interviewed used blues music to drive the blues away from audience members who might come to a performance in a low or distraught mood, or to perform songs related to social issues that others can identify with. Thornetta Davis said blues music had the power to heal as well as to entertain, a statement that reveals a connection to the female healers, root doctors, conjure doctors and voodoo queens of the past.<sup>512</sup> “I get onstage and say, ‘God speak through me. Whatever I do, make it your will, and I hope I help somebody tonight, just by singing.’”<sup>513</sup> The blues women of the 1920s, many of whom emerged from southern backgrounds rich in religious and folk culture, extended the folk traditions of their pasts by utilizing them to help solve the problems of other black women. This form of healing took place in public during a blues performance. According to Daphne Duval Harrison, the process of a blues performance worked in such a way that women could perhaps discover “physical, psychological, and spiritual balance.”<sup>514</sup> Both Thornetta and the 1920s blues queens engaged with their audiences through blues performance, which attempts to fulfill a need for leisure and entertainment as well as a need for a spiritual, cathartic experience.

Hazel V. Carby, Daphne Duval Harrison, and Angela Y. Davis have all asserted the existence of a woman’s blues different from men’s blues as a way of explaining the continued

involvement of African American and non-African American women in what has become a predominantly masculine field. For Davis, women's blues represents more pronounced themes of love and sexuality than those found in men's blues. Davis also said that ideas of love and sexuality found in women's blues as proffered by singers like Bessie Smith and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey contradicted mainstream ideological assumptions regarding women and their being in love. According to Davis, women's blues also challenged the masculine notion of the domestic sphere as a woman's "place."<sup>515</sup> Finally, Davis suggests that the blues women tradition of emphasizing love and sexuality in their work not only describes daily experience, but also acts as a "coded yearning for liberation," as indicated earlier.<sup>516</sup> Harrison writes that women's blues "introduced a new, different model of black woman—more assertive, sexy, more sexually aware, independent, realistic, complex, and alive."<sup>517</sup> She indicates that the blues milieu of the 1920s allowed blues women of that decade to construct new and rebellious identities.<sup>518</sup> Carby, who concerns herself with the cultural politics of women's blues, identifies women's blues as the playing field on which female blues singers struggle with men over gender issues. That cultural and political struggle opposes the objectification of female sexuality under patriarchy, and it enabled the blues women of the 1920s to reclaim their bodies as sexual, sensuous subjects, at least in song."<sup>519</sup> Carby sees women's blues as a medium through which women express the struggle against patriarchal sexual relations that objectify and seek to control a woman's sexuality.

For Detroit's modern blues women, the difference between men's and women's blues boiled down to a question of a man's or a woman's perspectives as they applied to the performance of blues music. Some said that a blues song written from a man's perspective and performed from a woman's perspective, or vice versa, produced entirely different interpretations.

Although she did not admit to the existence of a woman's blues different from a man's, Lady T acknowledged a demand and a need on the part of fans for blues music sung from a woman's perspective.<sup>520</sup> "I think the blues is the blues, no matter who sings it," Lady T said. "But I found this to be true: There is a desire to hear a woman. They want to see a woman up there singing about male and female relationships." Thornetta Davis also denied the existence of a specifically "women's blues," but said social advancements had been made for female performers of blues music, and that she felt a sense of liberation or a strengthened confidence that enabled her, and other blues women, to confront men through song. "We tell them, 'Go on, get on then. I don't need this heartache in my life,'" Thornetta said. "I think we all grow through the same blues. I don't think it's a man or woman thing."<sup>521</sup> Out of the questions pertaining to the existence of a women's blues, some of the women interviewed responded with answers alluding to sexual differences in blues interpretations and performances, but they did not acknowledge the existence of a "women's blues."

Of the four women interviewed, only Cathy Davis agreed with the feminist scholars' assertions of women's blues.<sup>522</sup> Davis, who included songs protesting domestic violence in her performances and was conscious of and opposed to, discrimination against women in the music business, said, "I think there's a woman's blues. There are things that a woman goes through that a man will never experience."<sup>523</sup> Davis said that an equal playing field in terms of sexual relations had never existed and that a women's blues comes from the double standards that disadvantage women. She also defined a women's blues as something created by the different perspectives of men and women who sing a particular song. "You get one understanding when a woman sings it and one understanding when a guy sings it," Davis said.<sup>524</sup> It appeared that even

when the women rejected the concept of women's blues, some of them still expressed that there were differences between blues sung by women and blues sung by men.

In 1978, Chicago's Queen of the Blues, Koko Taylor, quite overtly highlighted some of the differences between men's and women's blues with "I'm a Woman," her sexually-transformed version of "Mannish Boy," a 1955 song credited to Muddy Waters, Mel London, and Bo Diddley. Taylor used the same familiar melody and music that Waters and company wrote but took the liberty to rewrite the lyrics. Included in both versions are boasts of sexual prowess, but while Waters lays the main focus of his song on his status as a "natural born lovers' man," Taylor uses the musical framework of the song to build a much broader statement on what it means to be a woman. The mother character in Waters's song tells her boy that he is going to be the greatest man alive, while the mother character in Taylor's version tells her daughter that becoming a woman requires that she must learn to sing the blues, in other words, learn to suffer. After growing into womanhood and becoming a blues woman, Taylor's "woman" has wisdom and knowledge, and can boast of supernatural powers. She pledges to "shake hands with the devil and make him crawl in the sand." Taylor's "woman" is a love maker, but she is also a "rushing wind," a "ball of fire," and an "earth shaker." Thus composed of the earth's elements, the female subject in Taylor's song is multidimensional woman, who lists love making as one of many talents. The male subject in Waters's version can only boast of his sexuality.

Taylor out boasts Waters, but she also presents the listener with a metaphorical treatise on what she feels it means to be a woman. The song also reveals her view of the inequality between men and women. As a woman, she is told go out and to sing the blues and learn on her own. As a man, Waters's subject is told that he was born to be the greatest, and that his talents are "natural born." He is free to be a "rollin' stone" and therefore free of responsibility. On the

other hand, Taylor's "woman" is so dedicated to the world, or perhaps to other women, that she is willing to wrest control of the world from the devil, who is also a "man." She can "make love to a crocodile," another depiction of a man, without fear as well as withstand the powers of a decidedly masculine devil. Although most instances of interpretation in blues music are much more subtle and nuanced, Taylor lyrics cleverly and blatantly represent liberation and freedom from patriarchy.

Interpretation often differentiates men's and women's blues, but the interpreter onstage and the interpreter in the audience do not necessarily coincide in terms of understanding a blues song. Cee Cee Collins articulated this in her own definition of blues music, which she said she admired for its applicability to real life. "As a listener, the point may be different for you as the point I get as a performer, but everybody gets [some] point and they relate it to their own lives," Collins said.<sup>525</sup> Paul and Beth Garon have written that men and women actually hear the blues differently, and derive different meanings from the songs. They offer for an example a song called "Maggie Campbell's Blues." According to the Garons, the male author of the song meant the "Maggie" in the song to be a Maggie look-alike, or an imposter. Female listeners, on the other hand, perceived Maggie to be a nearly exhausted, less confident version of herself.<sup>526</sup> With women songwriters, Angela Davis sees the creation of a dialectical relationship between the subject of the song (not always the songwriter) and an imagined community of women. In other words, a song adopting the well-worn theme of a man doing a woman wrong would represent a woman telling a story about the man to a community of women rather than lodging a complaint directed toward the victimizer. The songwriter's peculiar perspective allows individual female listeners to place themselves within a group experience, or a sisterhood, which possibly could breed solidarity with other women rather than a sense of aloneness.<sup>527</sup>

Whether an imagined audience or a very real component of contemporary blues audiences, the historically rooted sisterhood, or community of women long present in blues music, plays a substantial role in blues music produced and performed by the modern blues women. This can be seen as both a tradition in women's blues music that goes back to the days of the 1920s blues queens as well as the product of more recent efforts toward women's liberation. Even when speaking of men, both wrong- and right-doing, blues queens of the past directed their complaints about men and their praise of men to a female audience. Ma Rainey asked their audience love-related questions like, "did you ever wake up with your good man on your mind," and performed blues songs that commanded attention from women in the audience ("Girls, I feel like screamin' I feel like cryin'").<sup>528</sup>

Although they are not exactly performing the advice songs to women that the blues women of the past frequently performed, some of the modern blues women as songwriters have spoken directly to a community of women. Thornetta Davis's "Sister Friends Indeed" is a song written in praise of other women who have helped the subject of the song (apparently Thornetta) through her difficulties. The song, absent any references to men, is a song of thanks for the women in the subject's life in which the female objects of praise could be family or could be women in general. Acknowledging "sisters," "sister power," her friends and her mother, and her idea that she is blessed because of their love; the song is an appreciatory blues-hymn to a community of women that is somehow related to the subject of the song:

*When I contemplated giving up on me  
 You were the one that helped me to see  
 That in this life there's only one to live  
 And God gave me this gift to give  
 You had my back when no one else would  
 For that fact I wish you all good  
 Because of you I will always be  
 Forever grateful sister friend indeed<sup>529</sup>*



Cathy Davis believes that there is a women's blues that not only offers a woman's perspective, but also one that can directly reach out to other women. She said she often performs "Don't Put Your Hands On Me," a Koko Taylor song about domestic violence. "When I do it, I get compliments from so many women who are battered at home," Davis said. "They say, 'You just don't know what that song meant to me.'" <sup>530</sup> Cathy Davis said one of her intents as a blues performer is to reach out to other women. "I want to do something that says, 'No, you're not going to do this to me anymore,'" Davis said. "I want women to peel back those layers."<sup>531</sup> The notion of using the blues to rid oneself or someone else of the blues as a form of healing has been an integral part of the blues woman tradition. The blues is confronted, acknowledged, and named through song, which is, according to Angela Y. Davis, "the aesthetic means of expelling the blues from one's life."<sup>532</sup>

While the modern day blues women are more advisory and conciliatory with other women—a trait attributed to the 1920s blues queens-- this is not always the case, especially when it comes to conflicts between performers.<sup>533</sup> Lady T complained of "some hating in the game" and said one woman got in the practice of stealing from her repertoire as well as from her persona. "I learned in the business. I learned to handle people with a long-handled spoon." Lady T said the woman said, "I love you," at the same time, she stole from her act. "Folks in this business are always saying 'I love you, I love you,' and I got to the point where I just started saying 'ditto,'" Lady T said.<sup>534</sup> A woman full of confidence, Lady T was reluctant to acknowledge any gender discrimination in the music business, but she said she did see that the age of a female performer could be the cause of some discrimination. She said that talent would likely trump youth. "If she got no talent, and then you put my old ass out there, the

discrimination would be because this old woman can sing her ass off and the young one can't do nothing," Lady T said.<sup>535</sup>

The concerns presented by the women had less to do with performance of the blues *per se* and more to do with their difficulty finding work in the city of Detroit. Beginning in the late 1990s, blues venue after blues venue closed, radically shrinking available performance spaces. Some of the modern blues women also complained about city officials' apparent lack of interest to lend support, to promote, or to preserve its blues musicians or Detroit's blues legacy.<sup>536</sup> Accustomed in Detroit to the lowest paying venues, the women sought out-of-town engagements out of necessity and some looked forward to a day when they could stay in Detroit and remain close to family without having to survive barely in a marginal music scene.<sup>537</sup> Some also suggested that city officials could do something about increasing tourism in Detroit, something they said could serve as sort of a refresher to the city's declining blues scene.<sup>538</sup> At the time of the interviews, the thought of the city or even corporate sponsors, whose numbers have dwindled in support of Detroit music, taking action to support a blues scene in Detroit seemed unrealistic since both the city and the corporate sponsors of the festivals were scaling down instead of taking on new projects.<sup>539</sup> Staying in Detroit seemed to open some of the women up to the criticisms that by doing so they are merely holding onto the illusion of having a career in music and being reluctant to take the risk of relocation that could better their career. Some of the women do not depend on music for their entire income and their dedication to blues performance forced them to continue to seek new or novel venues for performance in Detroit.

Thornetta Davis, known as Detroit's "Princess of the Blues," said she depended on music for her living, and that by balancing Detroit shows with out-of-town engagements, she could make one. She added, presumably in comparison with those less fortunate, that she considered

herself lucky to be living in Detroit and making a living playing music.<sup>540</sup> Like musicians in a number of musical genres, such as jazz, folk music, rock-and-roll, and hip-hop, blues musicians such as these women have learned to survive on the margins and have kept their presence known in the city by playing small clubs and special events where audiences still exist for them. Because Detroit has become a very difficult city in which to find year-round work in music, the modern day blues women often have to leave the city temporarily to work blues festivals and club dates. They have carved a place for themselves in the public sphere of an industry that like so many others has sought to marginalize or suffocate their ambitions.

In the sense of seeking and demonstrating freedom and empowerment through the medium of the blues, the modern day blues women of Detroit carried on some of the traditions established by blues women in the past. Thornetta Davis obtained a greater sense of freedom through performing that led to the development of new skills that she was once apprehensive about attempting. “I go to work to be free,” Thornetta said. “I think music allows us that feeling.”<sup>541</sup> Although she attributed her songwriting skills and her ability to establish deeper connections with her audiences, that is, her talents, to God, she also admitted that these things improved for her with experience.<sup>542</sup> With over twenty years experience in the music business, a business she once feared to get involved in, Thornetta became a self-managed businesswoman.<sup>543</sup> Though overcoming her fear of the business end of music led to new freedoms, it was not her intention. She said she simply had to find work, and, in the process, she took on the music business.<sup>544</sup> “You won’t work if you’re afraid of the business,” she said.<sup>545</sup> On the other hand, the fact that these four women all managed their own careers also exposed Detroit’s lack of music-business-types, such as managers and booking agents. In a world that is competitive and

often relies on the social networking that these music types participate in, a musician's total independence is not always desirable.

Apart from Thornetta Davis, who reached a point where she could support herself with her music, these modern blues women have remained marginal on the Detroit blues scene, which has almost completely collapsed after experiencing a revival from the 1980s through the early 2000s. "We could do better if we had more oomph behind us," Collins said, as she referred to the desire for help through city involvement in promoting Detroit's blues artists.<sup>546</sup> Realistically, however, there has been no history of city involvement in the music business outside the city's sponsorship of occasional musical events, which corporate sponsors took over and later dropped.<sup>547</sup> Cathy Davis said she had no faith that the three recently built casinos in the city would have anything to offer to most blues musicians and that they would provide a less than ideal audience. "You have to be as commercial as you can while you're there, because they don't want you to pull a big crowd from the gaming tables," Davis said.<sup>548</sup>

Perhaps the most detrimental aspect of playing the blues in Detroit for these women was the closure of a few key nightclubs that catered to blues artists and blues audience in the past few decades. In 1999, the Soup Kitchen, downtown Detroit's venerable home of the blues for twenty-five years, closed its doors. The Music Menu, also in the downtown area, which booked blues, rhythm-and-blues and rock-and-roll acts and regularly featured Thornetta Davis, followed suit in 2003. The Attic Bar, a blues institution in Hamtramck for twenty years, became a sports bar in 2008. The local festivals that featured blues artists, such as the Chrysler Foundation's and the DTE Energy Foundation's Festival of the Arts, ceased to operate in 2008. The Comerica Bank-sponsored Cityfest, a four-day-long music festival that booked many local acts, ended in 2010.<sup>549</sup> Although not all the various clubs and festivals ceased to operate because of the

economy, most of them did, and they served as examples related to the long and continuing economic decline of the city of Detroit.

In the still existing clubs open to the blues, which are mostly located in the suburbs of Detroit, some of the women said they ran into problems of compatibility and inadequate pay. Lady T has turned down engagements in Detroit because she is appalled at the pay scale offered to local blues musicians in relation to the amount of work expected by some bar owners. “They want to pay you twenty, twenty-five dollars, not more than fifty, and we’re worth more than that,” Lady T said. “They want us to work three sets—that’s three one-hour sets.”<sup>550</sup> Cathy Davis also spoke up when confronted with the pittances Detroit bar owners have offered her and her bands. “We are some of the lowest-paid musicians I know,” Davis said. Davis said she had no problem confronting bar owners when she felt she was being taken advantage of, but she said that that can also be somewhat of a curse that keeps her out of the better clubs. “The quality places that there are, I’m a little too raw for them . . . raw is because I speak my mind.”<sup>551</sup>

Apart from regular, paid performances, some of the women either participate in or host jam sessions at various venues in the Detroit area that invite musicians to sit-in with a band. Bar owners usually paid the band for the jam session, but the musicians who sat in played without pay. However, appearing at jam sessions when she first began to perform in Detroit was beneficial to Lady T, because she made connections with other musicians and was able to promote her performing skills, which led to paid work. “I went to jam sessions every night out of the week until I got recognized and people started recognizing that little woman . . . and then fans started calling me to work with them, to do gigs with them. So that’s basically how I got started,” Lady T said.<sup>552</sup> Thornetta Davis found her first working band, a white group called the Chisel Brothers, at a local jam session.<sup>553</sup> The open-mic jam sessions also benefited the bands

the various venues pay to host them. Both of Cathy Davis's bands, the Soul Searchers and Cathy Davis and the Guys, hosted jam sessions in 2005 at Nancy Whiskey in Detroit and the New Way bar in Ferndale. Davis, who worked for the city of Detroit until the early 2000s to take care of her mother and spend more time playing music, said she enjoyed working with younger or less-experienced musicians. "I have some young musicians that come down there that are able to hone their skills with musicians that have been around for a long time," Davis said. "They're given tips; they're pampered and taken under the wing. Most of them call me Mom, anyway."<sup>554</sup>

Although the jam sessions in some sense can be viewed as another example of a marginal blues scene where very few musicians are paid enough to support themselves, they are also related to the apparent tradition of musicians seeking to play with other musicians, or for a musically knowledgeable audience. Not just another free performance for all those who participate except the host band, the jam sessions offer a way to keep musicianship sharp, or offer training grounds leading to paid engagements. With the open mic jam sessions, blues musicians have the opportunity to network with each other and to form groups, as well as to expose themselves to a wider audience. Up to the present, players have pitted their skills against another's in the "cutting contests" that, in the 1930s, earned guitarist/singer/ songwriter Memphis Minnie the reputation of being "good as any man." Alberta Adams attested to music continuing after hours in the 1940s, that is, after the legal hours in which bars and nightclubs could sell liquor.<sup>555</sup> Throughout their history, blues musicians have generally reserved a space in which musicians could play for sheer enjoyment, camaraderie, and the opportunity to compete and learn in a relatively neutral zone.<sup>556</sup>

Since all these women would rather stay in Detroit rather than relocate to another city, they utilize out-of-town blues festivals across the United States and Europe that take them out of

Detroit for a short time. The festivals, which usually take place in the spring and summer months, allow them to leave Detroit for short periods to perform in other cities. They also serve as a viable alternative to relying on Detroit venues to make a living. Cee Cee Collins tours regularly with Alberta Adams. Lady T crossed the United States and Canada with Kate Hart's Detroit Women. Thornetta Davis, who first played the Frog Island Music Festival in Ypsilanti, Michigan, before she went on to tour the United States, Canada, and Europe, entered a blues contest in Memphis, Tennessee. Another blues singer who wound up arranging a short tour of Norway for Thornetta after she saw her perform. "I [was] there for a week, because one of the ladies who was a blues singer saw me, saw my show, and then a week after I had gotten back, she called me . . . something even better is going to come out of that. I believe this," Thornetta said.<sup>557</sup>

Thornetta Davis, who was not alone among these women, also held the faint hope that economic improvement in Detroit would allow the city to begin to support Detroit blues artists and foster Detroit's blues legacy.<sup>558</sup> Although the location of three casinos in Detroit initially held promise for Detroit musicians, they have been disappointed, she said. "We're not utilizing our jewel, which is the music, musicians and the talent we have here," Thornetta said. Thornetta also believed that the city could help promote Detroit's music talent, and that the tourism Detroit music generated could provide funds that could help pull the city out of its economic doldrums.<sup>559</sup> There is a lingering hope among these women that the city can somehow revive its music scene, and if not replicate the golden age of Motown, then at least reinstitute Detroit's reputation as one of the country's finest music cities. Cathy Davis said she used to earn some respect from other musicians just because she came from Detroit, but that has changed. Davis said there was in the 1960s and 1970s national recognition of Detroit and its musicians. "Now, you're biting

and scratching like the rest of them, but I think it's because Motown pulled out of here and a lot of other places have fallen by the wayside."<sup>560</sup> Thornetta Davis, Cathy Davis, and Cee Cee Collins, the three women born in Detroit, spoke proudly of the city's history in music, but admitted that what they faced was a dying local blues scene.<sup>561</sup> Nevertheless, they remained dedicated to the city of Detroit. "We're loyally here, and we're brokely here," Cathy Davis said.<sup>562</sup>

The women have reasons to stay in Detroit. They are all mothers, they have extended families in and around the city, and they have invested in homes as well as invested themselves in the city of Detroit by choosing to establish their careers in Detroit. Thornetta Davis argued that they should not have to leave Detroit to make a living in music, and, at this point, they are not likely to do so.<sup>563</sup> Most of them complain about lousy wages, but cannot see any remedy except to play outside of Detroit more. Cathy Davis complains of backbiting and the development of exclusive cliques in the city's blues scene, and feels that many Detroit musicians undervalue themselves by taking jobs that pay poorly. "[W]e accept less. That's the only thing I can say, because if you're not going to take it, there's another band there that will. And the bar owners know this. If you don't accept this, there's another band biting in your back to have that spot," Cathy said.<sup>564</sup> Some of the women were willing to put up with a less than adequate blues scene and maintain the hope that, in Davis's words, "we can bring life back to Detroit like it used to be."<sup>565</sup>

Even in a city like Detroit, where the music business is marginal to the economy and quality engagements are scarce, some of the modern Detroit blues women have had to overcome obstacles that have had much less impact on male musicians. Others deny that those obstacles exist. Cathy Davis, who complained of a combination of fatism, sexism, and ageism on the local



and national blues scenes, which she said required that a woman be young, and maintain a sleek figure in order to be viewed as commercially viable. Men, she said, did not have to meet the same requirements. Instead of seeing exclusionary values, which are patriarchal in nature and have become key values in the commodification of female sexuality, weakening their grip in the music business, she said they were increasing. She said these values applied to the local blues scene, too, and that the masculine side of blues music still held sway in Detroit. "It's very male dominant," she said. "You can't just get up there and be good. You have to have that persona a man is looking for."<sup>566</sup> Davis, who is a big woman, compared the situation in her day to that of some successful blues women in the past. "If you look at Big Mama Thornton and some of these blues women in the day, they were heavy, belting women," Davis said.<sup>567</sup> On the local level, Davis brought up the now-deceased Butler Twins, who were very heavy and very successful on the local blues scene prior to their deaths in the early 2000s. "I'll put it like this, the Butler Twins? Put a heavy woman onstage? A woman has to go up there and be good and be eye candy . . . it's changing for the worse to me," Cathy Davis said.<sup>568</sup> Davis said she deals with the predicament by putting it out of her head when she performs.<sup>569</sup>

The other women interviewed did not see things the same way as Cathy Davis, and some denied both the idea of age bias, sexism, and male dominance in the music business, as they knew it. Collins said that she believed blues men were not mapping out blues styles that women clamored for anymore, and said that women now do well enough on their own.<sup>570</sup> Lady T, who held the belief that true talent would eventually conquer youth, said that she did not believe that sexism had much of an impact on her career. When she imagined herself competing with another woman, however, she defined the other women as both young and without talent and did

not provide for the possibility that youthful competition could also be talented. She said her vocal talents would succeed over “the young one [who] can’t do nothing.”<sup>571</sup>

Besides performing, a secondary concern that these women held regarding music business was its business side. All the women interviewed were self-managed and in charge of hiring and firing band members. As solo performers, they booked their own engagements in nightclubs and at festivals, and decided the logistics for band rehearsals and recording sessions, all of which made them active participants in the music business apart from vocations or avocations as performers. Like all these women, Lady T learned about the music business only after she became a part of the Detroit blues scene and the impression of the music business in Detroit that she learned through experience was not favorable. According to Lady T, bar owners were unsympathetic to the notion that some blues artists depended on pay for performances for their livelihoods. She described the pay in Detroit as “rotten.” She saw playing outside of Detroit, where her and her band can make about six-hundred dollars a night, as the only real alternative to playing Detroit. “In Detroit, you never walk away with more than fifty dollars per man,” she said.<sup>572</sup>

The modern blues women added to the blues woman tradition by expanding the musical parameters of authentic blues music through the incorporation of blues-derived musical genres into their performances. They viewed blues music in the “larger sense” that Ulrich Adelt described as common among African Americans, who, in some cases, related other musical genres to the blues.<sup>573</sup> The melding of blues music and its offspring began in the 1920s with the close relation blues and jazz and continued through swing in the 1930s and rhythm-and-blues in the 1940s. Adelt contends that black listenership to blues in a “larger sense” continued through the 1960s with the advent of funk and soul artists like Otis Redding, Aretha Franklin, and James

Brown. Although the blues has continued to inspire other genres of black music, such as hip hop, it is the musical innovations of the 1960s and their extended influence that have affected most of the Detroit's modern blues women, and many of the non-traditional blues they include in their performances come from that era.

As was the case with Alberta Adams, what is missing in a comparison with the blues women of the 1920s, and those of the decades since, is one of the socio-cultural purposes of the 1920s blues queens. The blues queens of the 1920s used their experience with love and sexuality, their goal of freedom and liberation, and their extensive experience with travel, both as migrants and as performers, to help them advise and inform other working-class women, and men. The blues women illustrated the differences between North and South, the differences between rural and urban, and the differences between man and woman. The historical context of their decade-long reign, which included the Great Migration, the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro Movement as well as a tremendous amount of musical innovation, meant some advancement for African Americans as well as great upheaval and tragedy. Their advisory role on human relationships, their fulfillment of the need for new migrants to the North for Southern nostalgia, and their role as chroniclers of the Great Migration bound these women so tightly to African American culture that their presence reverberated well beyond the point that their commercial appeal declined.

In *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*, Daphne Duval Harrison described the “essence” of the 1920s blues queens as “autonomous, indomitable, versatile, ambitious, industrious, and sensuous.”<sup>574</sup> The modern blues women, who, in addition to their involvement in the music business as performers, also overcame fears and apprehensions regarding the business end of music in order to perform, carried on the essence of the blues queens of the

1920s. They managed their careers, came up with marketing ideas and led bands. Their do-it-yourself careers attest to a group of women who were strong enough to face the local music business and maintained the confidence required to demonstrate their strengths and vulnerabilities in public settings. The essential qualities of the blues women, as delineated by Harrison, revealed themselves primarily through performance, but also surfaced in the beliefs, perspectives, and lifestyles of the women as expressed in the interviews.

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<sup>467</sup> Cathy Davis, interview by author, transcript, Detroit, Michigan, 23 March 2005, 5.

<sup>468</sup> Ulrich Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties: A Story in Black and White* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 137.

<sup>469</sup> Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 107.

<sup>470</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 45.

<sup>471</sup> Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 219.

<sup>472</sup> William Barlow, *Looking Up at Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 131-132.

<sup>473</sup> Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), 153.

<sup>474</sup> Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 66-67.

<sup>475</sup> Marybeth Hamilton, "Sexuality, Authenticity, and the Making of the Blues Tradition," *Past & Present* 169 (Nov. 2000): 133-134.

<sup>476</sup> Hamilton, "Sexuality," 150.

<sup>477</sup> Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 5.

<sup>478</sup> On blacks turning away from the blues, see Marybeth Hamilton, "Sexuality," 134; Jones, *Blues People*, 140-141; Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 107-108., and Gerri Hershey, *Nowhere to Run: The Story of Soul Music* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 5.

<sup>479</sup> Ulrich Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties: A Story in Black and White* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>480</sup> Cathy Davis interview, 23 March 2005, 6.

<sup>481</sup> "Jump Blues," <http://www.allmusic.com/explore/style/jump-blues-d405>, accessed 7 May 2011. .

<sup>482</sup> Lawrence N. Redd, "Rock! It's Still Rhythm and Blues," *The Black Perspective in Music* 13 (Spring 1985): 34.

<sup>483</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 101.

<sup>484</sup> Michael Murphy, "Ladies Sing the Blues," 14.

<sup>485</sup> Lady T is Alberta Adams's goddaughter, Cee Cee Collins often tours with Adams, and Thornetta Davis named Adams her mentor in the 1990s.

<sup>486</sup> Although musical genres such as rhythm-and-blues, rock-and-roll, soul and funk were post-World War Two inventions, the same can be said of "pure," "country" or "traditional" blues, categories that also developed after World War Two. According to Marybeth Hamilton, the notions of "traditional" and "pure" blues had not been invented either until the 1950s, when white blues aficionados and revivalists more or less invented those categories. Hamilton, "Sexuality," 156.

<sup>487</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties*, 14.

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- <sup>488</sup> Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 6.
- <sup>489</sup> Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 8.
- <sup>490</sup> Hamilton, "Sexuality," 144. Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 114.
- <sup>491</sup> Murphy, "Ladies Sing the Blues," 14.
- <sup>492</sup> Murphy, "Ladies Sing the Blues," 14.
- <sup>493</sup> Lady T interview, 26 May 2010, 5.
- <sup>494</sup> Lady T interview, 26 May 2010, 5.
- <sup>495</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 101.
- <sup>496</sup> Paul and Beth Garon, *Woman with Guitar: Memphis Minnie's Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 92.
- <sup>497</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 14.
- <sup>498</sup> On authenticity, see Perry A. Hall, *In the Vineyard: Working in African American Studies* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 161. On the blues continuum, see Jones, *Blues People*, 166-174.
- <sup>499</sup> Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 346.
- <sup>500</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties*, 137.
- <sup>501</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties*, 7.
- <sup>502</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties*, 2.
- <sup>503</sup> David Grazian, *Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Blues Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 34.
- <sup>504</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 9.
- <sup>505</sup> Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 8.
- <sup>506</sup> Cathy Davis interview, 23 March 2005, 2.
- <sup>507</sup> Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 8.
- <sup>508</sup> Bessie Smith also wrote and performed a song entitled, "Preachin' The Blues," which Angela Davis describes as "a spiritual discourse about love." Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 130; For work that explores the relationship of the blues and spirituality, see Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 9-12; John Michael Spencer, *Blues and Evil* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 117-123; Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 134-139.
- <sup>509</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 221.
- <sup>510</sup> Spencer, *Blues and Evil*, 120-123.
- <sup>511</sup> Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 14.
- <sup>512</sup> Paul and Beth Garon, *Woman with Guitar*, 151-152; Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 7.
- <sup>513</sup> Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 7.
- <sup>514</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 220.
- <sup>515</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 11.
- <sup>516</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 173.
- <sup>517</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 111.
- <sup>518</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 6.
- <sup>519</sup> Hazel V. Carby, *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* (London: Verso, 1999), 10-11
- <sup>520</sup> Murphy, "Ladies Sing the Blues," 14.
- <sup>521</sup> Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 7.
- <sup>522</sup> Murphy, "Ladies Sing the Blues," 18.
- <sup>523</sup> Cathy Davis interview, 23 March 2005, 1.
- <sup>524</sup> Cathy Davis interview, 23 March 2005, 2.
- <sup>525</sup> Murphy, "Ladies Sing the Blues," 14.
- <sup>526</sup> Paul and Beth Garon, *Woman with Guitar*, 98.
- <sup>527</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 62.
- <sup>528</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 62-63.
- <sup>529</sup> Thornetta Davis and Brett Lucas. "Sister Friends Indeed." *Uncut Detroit III: Live Studio Blues*. Venture Records, 2007.
- <sup>530</sup> Cathy Davis interview, 23 March 2005, 2.
- <sup>531</sup> Cathy Davis interview, 23 March 2005, 2.
- <sup>532</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 135.
- <sup>533</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 110.
- <sup>534</sup> Lady T interview, 26 May 2010, 8.
- <sup>535</sup> Lady T interview, 26 May 2010, 7.

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- <sup>536</sup> Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 3; Murphy, "Ladies Sing the Blues," 18.  
<sup>537</sup> Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 3; Lady T interview, 26 May 2010, 2.  
<sup>538</sup> Murphy, "Ladies Sing the Blues," 18. Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 3.  
<sup>539</sup> *The Detroit News*, 18 May 2010.  
<sup>540</sup> Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 3.  
<sup>541</sup> Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 14.  
<sup>542</sup> Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 8.  
<sup>543</sup> Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 7.  
<sup>544</sup> Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 11.  
<sup>545</sup> Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 6.  
<sup>546</sup> Michael Murphy, "Ladies Sing the Blues," 14.  
<sup>547</sup> *The Detroit News*, 18 May 2010.  
<sup>548</sup> Cathy Davis interview, March 2005, 4.  
<sup>549</sup> *The Detroit News*, 18 May 2010.  
<sup>550</sup> Lady T interview, 26 May 2010, 2.  
<sup>551</sup> Cathy Davis interview, 23 March 2005, 1.  
<sup>552</sup> Lady T interview, 26 May 2010, 9.  
<sup>553</sup> Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 10.  
<sup>554</sup> Murphy, "Break Out of the Past," 17.  
<sup>555</sup> Alberta Adams, interview by author, transcript, Detroit, Michigan, 26 June 2008, 8.  
<sup>556</sup> Paul and Beth Garon, *Woman with Guitar*, 10; Alberta Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 8.  
<sup>557</sup> Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 12.  
<sup>558</sup> Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 3.  
<sup>559</sup> Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2006, 3.  
<sup>560</sup> Cathy Davis interview, 23 March 2005, 6.  
<sup>561</sup> Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 2; Cathy Davis, 23 March 2005, 4; Murphy, "Ladies Sing the Blues," 18.  
<sup>562</sup> Cathy Davis interview, 23 March 2005, 6.  
<sup>563</sup> Thornetta Davis interview, 17 June 2010, 3.  
<sup>564</sup> Cathy Davis interview, 23 March 2005, 4.  
<sup>565</sup> Cathy Davis interview, 23 March 2005, 7.  
<sup>566</sup> Murphy, "Break Out of the Past," 14.  
<sup>567</sup> Cathy Davis interview, March 2005, 3.  
<sup>568</sup> Cathy Davis interview, March 2005, 2-3.  
<sup>569</sup> Cathy Davis interview, March 2005, 3.  
<sup>570</sup> Murphy, "Break Out of the Past," 13.  
<sup>571</sup> Lady T interview, 26 May 2010, 7.  
<sup>572</sup> Lady T interview, 26 May 2010, 2.  
<sup>573</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties*, 137.  
<sup>574</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 219.

## Chapter Five

## From Street Culture to Manufactured Image: Race, Credibility, and the Business of the Blues

Having utilized their business talents in part to enhance the careers of some of Detroit's best-known black women blues singers, white entrepreneurs and blues performers R. J. Spangler and Kate Hart became important figures in relation to the survival of women's blues in Detroit. Spangler and Hart marketed and promoted "Detroit blues" and Detroit blues women both within the city of Detroit and outside of its boundaries. Throughout the commercial history of women's blues, entrepreneurs such as record company owners, publishers, booking agents and nightclub owners—for good or for ill--have been predominantly white and male.<sup>575</sup> R. J. Spangler, a drummer who has played with an array of Detroit's black blues artists, manages Alberta Adams and has managed several other Detroit blues musicians. Spangler, bandleader and drummer for R.J.'s Rhythm Rockers, the band that supports Alberta Adams, was partially responsible for sustaining African American blues music in Detroit for nearly four decades. He has been able to support himself with various music-related occupations that include musician, artist manager, and co-owner of an independent record label. Kate Hart employed black female blues artists such as Lady T in a racially and musically diverse band of female singers called Detroit Women, a group that Hart marketed as a blues band. Hart, a vocalist first, also performed in the blues groups and other projects she created.<sup>576</sup>

Like many other blues artists, Kate Hart and R.J. Spangler have utilized blues music as both an artistic outlet and as a commercial business.<sup>577</sup> They have also demonstrated that the two are far from mutually exclusive and often interdependent in the do-it-yourself (DIY) business of music within which they operate.<sup>578</sup> Spangler and Hart have brought themselves and their artists success and recognition through their own business talents, but their techniques, while honed in a similar fashion, have since diverged. Hart has utilized a variety of music business professionals to assist her with the marketing and promotion of her musical projects. Spangler relies on his own membership in a quasi-old boy network made up primarily of baby boomers that has gained quite a bit of control over business matters in the world of blues music.<sup>579</sup> Spangler and Hart have resorted to an array of music business methods, such as fostering and maintaining relationships with booking agents, nightclub owners, and disc jockeys. They also have taken advantage of relatively new promotional tools, such as the Internet, and have used those tools to bring themselves and some of Detroit's blues women more exposure. Somewhat ironically, Spangler, Hart, and the blues women associated with them have succeeded as "Detroit" blues artists and entrepreneurs primarily by focusing on markets outside of Detroit.

Both of these artist/entrepreneurs said they became involved with the music business by default – they grappled with the music business out of necessity in order to further their careers and the careers of fellow musicians with whom they were involved. Kate Hart, who formed Detroit Women in 2003 and whose history in popular music stretches back to the late 1960s, is a singer and performer who ultimately became well versed in the music business after starting out with little more than confidence in herself and an assertive manner. Hart created and produced Detroit Women after having success with a similar band called Seattle Women, a 1990s group she formed and produced in the Pacific Northwest, while she resided in Seattle. Both bands were



multiple-singer groups that featured black and white blues women and presented material drawn from other musical genres, like country music, hip-hop, and gospel. Hart disbanded Detroit Women in 2008, but in its five-year lifespan, the group released several albums, won many awards and accolades, and toured the United States and Canada.<sup>580</sup> As a bandleader, Hart guided Detroit Women to an independent record label deal and ultimately hired a battery of assistants, including a publicist, a manager, and a road manager, to help the group achieve success.<sup>581</sup>

Native Detroiter Hart's first foray into professional music came in 1968 at the age of eighteen after she auditioned for and won a spot in the Detroit heavy metal band Raw Flesh.<sup>582</sup> In 1969, she moved to Chicago, where she stayed until 1978 before moving to Seattle, a city she lived in for approximately twenty-five years. Hart moved back to Detroit in 2002 and carried out her plans to form Detroit Women.<sup>583</sup> Her recorded history in the music business began in 1972 when she returned to Detroit briefly after establishing her residence in Chicago. Back in Detroit, she recorded "Syncopated Love," a record that was distributed nationally by a Detroit label called Stag Records. Included in her press materials is a statement that she became Stag Records' first white artist, a claim that shows that Hart sought to establish credibility as a blues singer by associating with African Americans early in her career.<sup>584</sup> Hart has since issued solo albums (*Tonight I Want it All*, 1990; *Queen of the Night*, 1999; and *Alone Again with Friends*, 2008) and albums by the groups Seattle Woman (*We Are Not Good Girls*, 1999, and *Backporch Gossip*, 1999) and Detroit Women (*Live at Memphis Smoke*, 2004; *Rattle Your Cage*, 2005; *Sock it to Me, Santa*, 2006; and *Sassitude*, 2007). In addition, she released a rock-and-roll album in 2000 using the alias of Lucy Mongrel. With years of vocal training under her belt, Hart also established herself as a vocal teacher and has released a series of vocal training compact discs for children and adults in the 2000s. Hart, also an actor and writer, has written short stories,

children's books, screenplays, and a novel.<sup>585</sup> She received multiple Detroit Music awards for her work with Detroit Women and several Northwest Area Music Association awards for her work with Seattle Women, including awards for best female blues singer, best blues recording, and best blues band.

Similar to black female blues musicians who manage their own careers like Thornetta Davis, Hart said overcoming her fear of the business world had a lot to do with her success. "It just took courage," she said. "You've got to be fearless."<sup>586</sup> In her role as an entrepreneur, Kate Hart produced some of her recordings; put together large groups of women such as Seattle Women and Detroit Women; hired musicians, managers, and publicists; and negotiated contracts with agents and record labels.<sup>587</sup> As a bandleader, she handled the business for her bands, a task she first took on in a 1970s Detroit band called Rocky Road. "That was in 1973, and the guy I worked with was a really good business guy," Hart said. "By working with him, I really started to understand what it takes to lead a band." Hart said that when Rocky Road went in a direction that did not please her, she formed her own band and "started to take on the business."<sup>588</sup>

In *This Business of Music Marketing and Promotion*, author Tad Lathrop defines marketing as "a systematic approach to following the money trail of commercial music," which entails "shaping a product" for "maximum sales and exposure."<sup>589</sup> Hart described marketing as the art of "impressing people," and provided her own definition: "Marketing [is] . . . how do you get people to pay attention to you."<sup>590</sup> With Seattle Women, Detroit Women, and her solo recordings and performances, Hart set out make artistic works that would be commercial and potentially moneymaking. She designed her press kits toward those ends, emphasizing that Detroit Women, for example, was a regional and not a local band in an effort to make the group more attractive to potential employers. She listed the better-known acts that she or Detroit

Women performed with, believing that many people were impressed with name acts with which they were familiar.<sup>591</sup> She said it was one matter to form Detroit Women, and quite another matter to shape the product to attract consumers and to obtain work. “So we’re talking about marketing; we’re not talking about quality of music, or anything like that. That’s a whole other area. I hired the best players I could find, but it was about, ‘[W]hat can I do that’s going to impress a potential buyer,’” Hart said.<sup>592</sup> Commercial ventures from the outset, Seattle Women and Detroit Women were groups based on the concepts of musical and racial diversity, as well as facets of the blues women tradition, such as rebellion and emotive vocalizing.

Formed by Hart in 2003 primarily to play corporate events and music festivals across the United States and Canada, Detroit Women had many successes in its five years as an active group. The group, which eventually signed a contract with national booking agency, Aspen Talent, won twenty-three Detroit Music Awards from 2004 through 2006. Filmmakers documented their 2006 Canadian tour for an as-yet unfinished documentary. Detroit’s weekly alternative news magazine, *Metro Times*, included Detroit Women in its 2004 one-hundred-year musical genealogy chart of Detroit music after the group had been in existence for one year, and the band was featured in and/or reviewed in national blues music publications such as *Living Blues Magazine*, *Blues Revue Magazine*, *Blues Wax*, and *Blues Beat*. Enhancing their commercial viability, Detroit Women also obtained endorsement deals with Austin, Texas-based Dancing-Dingo All Natural Beauty Products and launched a national merchandising campaign for a Detroit Women clothing line.<sup>593</sup> Hart claimed that the acclaim and the moneymaking efforts were subservient to the main purpose of the group, which was to have a good time. “[T]he whole point of why we were doing it, pretty much, it was always, always fun,” Hart said.<sup>594</sup> However, Hart’s intention to bypass engagements at small nightclubs, and her plans to

produce Detroit Women musical products such as compact discs indicate wider ambitions. She also condoned associating the group with nonmusical products, such as a line of clothing and other products, and oversaw the making of a documentary film on the group, all of which imply that Detroit Women was just as much about doing business as it was about having fun.

Born in Lafayette, Indiana, but raised in Grosse Pointe Farms near the east side of Detroit, Richard John Spangler, known to his acquaintances as R. J. Spangler, first surfaced on the Detroit music scene in the 1970s. He performed in, and in some cases led, a number of bands, including Kuumba, the Sun Messengers and the Blues Insurgents. His later projects included the swing and avant-garde band, The Planet D Nonet, and a jazz combo, the R.J. Spangler Trio.<sup>595</sup> In the course of his career in music, Spangler became a well-known white blues aficionado, performed on thirty-two albums, and produced fourteen albums.<sup>596</sup> A self-defined “blues revivalist” best known for his attempts to breathe new life into the careers of Detroit blues musicians like Alberta Adams, Johnnie Bassett, Joe Weaver, and Odessa Harris, all of whom became Spangler’s managerial clients.<sup>597</sup> He parted ways with Bassett in the 1990s and Harris died in 2007. For the last sixteen years, R. J. Spangler has managed and played drums for Alberta Adams. He also leads her backing band, R. J.’s Rhythm Rockers, and other clients who remained on his roster included Joe Weaver and the Motor City R&B Pioneers, a group made up of Detroit blues- and rhythm-and- blues stars of the 1950s, like Weaver, Stanley Mitchell, and Kenny Martin.<sup>598</sup> Spangler expressed some concern that, due to the age of his remaining performers and his lack of interest in picking up new clients, his management days were numbered. However, he said he accomplished what he set out to do by bringing national and international attention to the black performers he has represented.<sup>599</sup>

In 1994, Alberta Adams asked Spangler to manage her career after she was able to see what he had done as manager for Johnnie Bassett, a Detroit blues man Spangler had managed since 1992.<sup>600</sup> Bassett, who in the 1950s and early 1960s was a session guitarist for Detroit's Fortune Records, played a slick blend of "urban blues" that was not too distant from rhythm-and-blues or the jump blues performed by Adams. Referring to his booking and management career, Spangler claimed that he did not seek out any of the artists he worked with, but said that as his reputation as a music businessperson grew, he soon found himself with a roster of notable Detroit African American artists, including Adams, who had come to him and requested his managerial services.<sup>601</sup> "These things drop in your lap," Spangler said. "So I really didn't search them out. They came to me."<sup>602</sup> Artists came to Spangler, however, because they could see what he was able to do with the careers of others, he said.<sup>603</sup> "I had been a Sun Messenger for a million years, and I'd been playing with and booking Johnnie Bassett. I built up contacts, so I started getting things where they'd need a woman singer, so I started booking little things [for Adams]," Spangler said. "She said, 'How come you're not representing me?' So I said, 'Well, I can change that.'"<sup>604</sup>

With Adams branded as Detroit's queen of the blues back in the 1940s, R. J. Spangler had no need to create a "brand" for her. As Detroit's queen of the blues, she already had one. However, since he began managing Alberta in 1994, he added much to that simple, but effective, promotional tool.<sup>605</sup> Adams, who played in Detroit sporadically over the previous two decades and had not recorded since the early 1960s prior to her 1994 association with Spangler, said that he revived her career, "I've been everywhere [since her association with Spangler]. To places I always wanted to go. I finally made it," Adams said.<sup>606</sup> In a later interview, Adams said, "Without God, I couldn't do it. I feel he got me across the country and back. He's just there.

Down here, I give my thanks to R. J.”<sup>607</sup> Unlike with some of her former managers and agents, Adams believed Spangler was working hard for her and working in her best interests.

Spangler toured extensively with Adams, especially in the South, where he said blues clubs were plentiful and blues music remained an important part of Southern black culture.<sup>608</sup> In the 1990s, Adams was no longer reluctant to tour the South, which, apart from being more welcoming in terms of race, was, and remains to be, a very lucrative market for black entertainers. Besides having a multitude of venues and cultural ties to the blues, the South has long been the backbone of support for black music of all types. In the 1950s, “enticing salaries” as well as welcoming audiences drew northern black entertainers to the southern states, despite the dangers represented by Jim Crow segregation and prevalent white supremacy. Black and white southern consumers bought an inordinate amount of records, and northern entertainers, like LaVern Baker, saw their records break first in the South.<sup>609</sup>

While Spangler did not create Alberta Adams’s brand as Detroit’s queen of the blues, he continued to promote her as such. In practice, Spangler did many of the same things in promoting Alberta Adams that Hart did for her groups and her solo career. He arranged radio station interviews; he obtained record deals for her; he posted news about Alberta on Internet websites that targeted blues aficionados; he solicited press coverage in local publications and in national blues magazines like *Living Blues* and he sometimes placed her with booking agents.<sup>610</sup> As far as booking her engagements, Spangler said it was not difficult. “I mean, she was on Chess Records, and every MCA boxed set on Chess Records has an Alberta Adams track, or two, or three. So true blues aficionados are interested in Alberta Adams,” he said.<sup>611</sup> Spangler’s connections in the music world, in combination with the residual fame of Alberta Adams, have saved him trouble booking her, obtaining media coverage in print and on radio for her, and even

procuring record deals for Adams, but he has resorted to modern marketing techniques, such as Internet websites, electronic mailing lists, and promotions to publicize Alberta.

As they have progressed in their careers, both Hart and Spangler have become more sophisticated music business professionals. Hart accomplished this by hiring publicists, booking agents, and management firms, while Spangler launched on a similar trajectory toward professionalism by continuing to nurture relationships with those who could advance the careers of his artists. Hart maintained a website and a presence on Facebook and Myspace, but delegated other tasks related to promoting and booking Detroit Women to managers and publicists, in the belief that her business acumen and her ability to work with other music business professionals would bring additional benefit to her projects. She had begun her career doing all her business herself, but no longer desired to do so, thinking assistance from professionals was much more effective. “You start out doing it yourself, and then you realize that you’ve got to bring in the best and get people who know what they’re doing. . . That’s the right way to do it. Now a lot of bands don’t do that, but they’re going from bar to bar,” Hart said.<sup>612</sup>

As musicians who surrounded and associated themselves with black blues artists and immersed themselves in black blues culture, Hart and Spangler strove to do more than just consume and sell authentic blues. They also strove for acceptance in a musical realm in which white performers are often deemed inauthentic, and from which they are sometimes excluded.<sup>613</sup> According to one definition, authenticity in blues music relates not only to African American heritage, but also to other factors, including class, gender, and the possession of “blackness,” a trope used to describe “the social experience of black people.” Often, “real” or authentic blackness is associated with the inner city, meaning that a working-class African American

would be closer to “blackness” than would a middle-class African American who aspires to assimilate into white-dominated larger society.<sup>614</sup> Despite the success of black, middle-class blues artists like Robert Cray, who blacks and whites have criticized for his middle-class background, the claim made in 1963 by Amiri Baraka that a middle-class blues singer would be a “contradiction in terms” still holds sway for many whites and blacks who seek to define authenticity in the blues.<sup>615</sup>

The authentic blues performer that dwells in the American mind, perhaps especially in the white American mind, is the poor, nonconforming, homeless black man, best exemplified by Delta blues artist Robert Johnson. Johnson, as Marybeth Hamilton points out, was very different from the early blues queens in that he totally escaped the notice of black record buyers when he recorded in the mid- to late-1930s.<sup>616</sup> Indeed, the blues queens are sometimes judged less authentic in part because of their popularity and commercial appeal. Hart and Spangler gained some degree of credibility by association with black performers, business people, and by associating themselves with blackness, but for them, approaching anything like blues authenticity involves a great expenditure of effort that is ultimately wasted since they are white middle-class blues artists. Unlike Alberta Adams, who, as she said, lived the blues to play the blues, neither Hart nor Spangler could become authentic blues players based on what some have deemed to be the required criteria of blackness and working-class origins.

That does not mean, however, that they could not become technically proficient and highly expressive blues musicians, nor does it mean that they could not accumulate valuable cultural capital and personal insight into blues music by associating themselves with black artists as they made their way through their careers. R. J. Spangler, more so than Hart, was a child of the 1970s, but both of the musician/entrepreneurs partook in the counterculture of the late 1960s,



which saw a growing number of white people listening to and playing music originated by blacks.<sup>617</sup> Hart said that she was the only white artist on a black label in her press materials for a reason. Her implications were that she sounded black or that she appealed to blacks, both of which made her potentially more credible to promoters and black and white blues audiences. Similarly, Spangler's friendships with 1960s counterculture icons such as fellow blues aficionado and blues promoter John Sinclair, as well as with his involvement with all the elder statesmen of Detroit blues, increased his credibility as a blues musician. Moreover, he also became more credible in his business dealings, because the "name" artists he managed were all black artists, even though the supporting musicians often were not. Spangler recognized the value of authentic black blues artists like Alberta Adams and became, in effect, a culture broker who exposed them to new audiences but also profited through his efforts to help further the careers of Detroit black blues artists. "All the great black artists in Detroit, from the late 1940s to the 1950s, I've played at least one gig with. I know them all," Spangler said.<sup>618</sup>

R. J. Spangler and Kate Hart take two different approaches to marketing blues music, which, for Spangler, appears as a precious black cultural commodity to be revered, preserved, and reproduced. In the latter capacity, he serves as a cultural broker, or an intermediary, who has absorbed black culture and is willing to transfer his knowledge of it to others, who, like him, stand outside of that culture. His ability to find work for his artists is based on relationships that have accrued between Spangler and other blues aficionados, who, he said, "run things." Therefore, he plays in several bands, manages several artists, and holds offices within blues-music organizations such as the Detroit Blues Society. Through his musical and business skills, he has gained credibility as a blues musician and a manager. Blues music is also the source of his living, and out of necessity, Spangler must appropriate it and exploit it best as he can, but

packaged primarily for blues aficionados--a relatively limited audience--the marketing of Spangler's blues music products is based in a low-level commercialism that complies with the DIY ethic of music production and promotion.

Springboarding off the legacy of black blues women, Hart's formula for Detroit Women and Seattle Women combined racial and generational diversity with the concept of musical "variety" in blues music developed primarily by black female blues artists such as Detroit's modern blues women. Detroit Women, like the four Detroit modern blues women in the previous chapter, indeed may have performed a "variety" blues (or Adelt's "blues in the larger sense") that appealed to modern blues audiences."<sup>619</sup> The rebellious attitude of 1920s blues women was quite similar to late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century attitudes that provided Hart with the rationale to tag Seattle and Detroit Women albums with titles such as "We Are Not Good Girls" and "Sassitude."<sup>620</sup> In both groups, the women were united and diverse and they professed a sense of solidarity among themselves and with other women. In the latter group, the women were associated with Detroit, which, in the popular imagination, is among the toughest predominantly African American cities in the world, and therefore compatible with gritty, low-down blues music. Lastly, they were a female group of singers self-categorized as singers of the blues, a musical genre known since the demise of the 1920s blues queens for its masculinity and its blackness, and therefore somewhat closed to women.<sup>621</sup> As women, they were rebellious just by their existence in the masculine world of the blues; their womanhood alone meant rebellion.<sup>622</sup> Like the blues queens, Adams, and Detroit's modern blues women, Detroit Women presented themselves as sassy blues women full of the right kind of attitude and the tenacity to survive in Detroit.

Considering the history of all the blues women who came before them, Hart's equation of blues, female sexuality, and gritty, urban Detroit could conceivably have added up to an authentic and even challenging female blues presentation, but maintaining that Detroit Women also possessed something for everybody--owing to the group's racial diversity and its musical variety—presented a conflict. Reviews and press materials on Detroit Women culled from national blues magazines indicated that Hart, or the group's publicist(s), intentionally placed Detroit Women in the niche market of the blues, but she also made clear that Detroit Women sought universal appeal. The attempt to broaden the group's appeal with too much "variety" detracted from Detroit Women's credibility as an authentic blues band. On the other hand, that same strategy of adhering to a blues image while not actually being a blues band made sense commercially because a wide swath of consumers who might have been more comfortable with other genres of music could still enjoy a blues band such as Detroit Women, a group that played to the crowd, so to speak.

Even for the blues women of the 1920s, maintaining a sense of commerciality and contriving, constructing, and manufacturing an image that mass audiences could readily absorb was common. Some blues scholars later criticized the blues queens and their songs, or perhaps more specifically, the men who in many cases stood behind the marketing and presentation of the blues women and their songs, for their distance from the "realism of the blues" and for being "a product of commercialization."<sup>623</sup> The realness, or authenticity, of many of those women worked on several levels, including race, class, and geographical origin. It is conceivable that the women overcame many of the more superficial aspects of the commerciality that surrounded them in the decade of the 1920s. After all, the Texas Nightingale really was a singer from Texas name Sippie Wallace, and there were few, if any, arguments that Ma Rainey was not, as she

claimed to be, the “mother of the blues.” These women affixed their personas to themselves long before their entry into the commercial world of the music business. In the case of Rainey, what began as a self-bestowed and somewhat pretentious title became authentic as she trudged across the country “preachin” her blues.

Detroit Women is a group name that held representations of a Detroit that no longer, or perhaps never, existed, as well as depictions of women’s sexuality and blues music that appear to have been flattened and made one dimensional for commercial purposes.<sup>624</sup> Detroit Women’s press materials portray the group as compatible with the tough working-class image of Detroit. Referring to the city of Detroit and “[i]ts struggle, its evolution, its emotion, its culture,” the promotional material for the group goes on to state that, “Detroit Women – a seven-woman, energy-infused rockin’ blues group – embody the gritty determination, the kinetic force that drives the Motor City.” The promotional material is playing off mythological but stereotypical representations of Detroit, wherein Detroit will and will always be what it was to members of the baby boom generation, namely the Motor City, Motown, and the Murder City, despite its progression beyond those characterizations.<sup>625</sup> The writer of the press materials is offering a reified, neutered image of Detroit. Imagined as tough but not dangerous, and gritty but not toxic, the city of Detroit magically becomes either devoid of urban danger or glorified because of urban danger. Either way, its commercial appeal is increased. The “region” could be Metropolitan Detroit of Southeastern Michigan, or it could be the Midwest. It is more likely a mythical “location” called Detroit, which is reified to appeal to middle-class consumers around the world who believe that the automobile capital of the world, Hitsville, U.S.A., and the Murder City, all time-relevant signposts, still aptly describe twenty-first-century Detroit.

In promotional press material written by Hart for Seattle Women, her views on women's sexuality, or her idea of how women's sexuality should be presented in relation to the blues, surface and are similar to her mythical conception of Detroit. Having left her "ego at the door," Hart first pictured the appearance of Seattle Women as a "major event" or a "one-of-a-kind happening" that would bring together the talents of the "northwest's top rhythm-and-blues singers." To that end, she first performed with singers Nancy Claire, Pattie Allen, Kathi McDonald, and L. J. Porter--the four women who stayed in Seattle Women for the duration of the group's existence--because she wanted to "get [her] name out there more." However, the single event overwhelmed Hart and she quickly forgot that "selfish reasons" led her to form the group. She ultimately realized that it was bigger than she was, and it blossomed into Seattle Women, a group with membership split between black and white women. Hart stressed the racial diversity of the group, but she also explained that women in the blues were a "race unto themselves" who shared the character "defect" of "feeling too much." Describing the blues as both "music" and an "experience" that all the women could relate to, Hart went on to describe how Seattle Women felt about blues music:

What each one of the women knew was that the blues we sang about is the pain that's so deep and secret that we weren't sure we could share it with complete strangers and, at them same time, knew it is the very pain that's the most universal. It is that secret pain we chose to sing about. We knew the blues was the joy of sharing our pain.

Hart also created a metaphor for her personal experience with the group: "For me, the women's show became an amusement park and each woman a thrill-seeking ride." Twenty-seven women performed at different times under the banner of Seattle Women, and Hart wrote, "All of them changed my life; how I live it; how I perceive who I am, and how I set my priorities today."<sup>626</sup>

Challenging the idea of a “universalized woman,” bell hooks writes that the universalization of the category “woman” generally refers to white women and the experience of materially privileged white females, and serves to deny race and class differences.<sup>627</sup> Apart from describing “each woman a thrill-seeking ride,” Hart tended more to universalize women by attributing a universal quality to her band mates, who differ by race and presumably by their individual approaches to music. Hart attempted to broaden the appeal of the group by defining women’s blues as the “joy of sharing . . . pain.” According to Hart’s definition, blues music is painful, emotionally wrought music blended with joy. Hart’s “blues women” are almost portrayed from a male perspective, that is, with their character “defect” of “feeling too much” and their deep wells of pain, which is somewhat eradicated by the joy of releasing pain. In addition, Hart, who set the agenda in terms of image for Seattle Women and Detroit Women, strangely refers to the other women as experiences of her own. Certainly some of that is due to the short format of a press release, and the premise of the press release--Hart is trying to sell a product.

In seeking a show of solidarity and unity, Hart also downplays the differences of the women. To her diversity does not appear to celebrate difference; but rather sameness, which is more acceptable on a commercial level. It is the idea that multiculturalism does not embrace differences, but only shared qualities. Truth lies in simplicity, not in complexity. All women are alike and all the female blues singers are alike, because all the blues singers dip into the well of pain, wrought out joyfully in performance. Based on Erving Goffman’s statement that “all social life is performed” and his own search for authenticity, sociologist David Grazian concludes “authenticity is always manufactured” and “its status is a contrivance.”<sup>628</sup> What Hart presents is a contrived, manufactured blues band, but the same reasons that make it inauthentic, such as a

compressed multiculturalism and mythical representations of “women” and “Detroit,” make it more appealing on a commercial level. Hart’s marketing instincts conflate the differences and inflate sameness, making for an imbalanced diversity that becomes part of a manufactured commercial commodity rooted not in authentic black culture but in reifications of black culture, blues music, and blues women.

With merchandise, endorsements, and a line of clothing, Kate Hart has moved her solo career, Seattle Women, and Detroit Women into the realm of high commerce and has essentialized blues music as well as the women in her groups in order to make them more marketable and accessible. Hart has constructed musical productions based on “variety” and “diversity,” but both terms were redefined for a commercial audience. Relying on professionals to help market her groups, Hart practically abandoned the DIY movement in order to come up with a slick, commercial product. Unlike Spangler, who, like many white blues aficionados, seeks to conserve blues music that originally appeared in Detroit in the 1940s and 1950s through his association with black blues artists of that era, Hart seeks to promote a modern blues enhanced by variety. In this respect, she is akin to the modern blues women, but the ways in which she defines “blues” as both music and experience based on the “pain” of that experience, and the joy found in the release of that pain, offers not an enhanced vision of blues music but a narrowed vision instead. Similarly, her description of female blues singers as a “breed of their own” contradicts the message of diversity and makes it apply only to essential qualities such as race and age. Even those differences blur in the consumer-friendly homogenized productions called Seattle Women and Detroit Women, two conceptual groups that, with the exception of geographical markers and personnel, are practically interchangeable.

<sup>575</sup> David Grazian, *Blue Chicago and the Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 152.

<sup>576</sup> Kate Hart, interview by author, transcript, Detroit, Michigan, 6 August 2010, 4.

<sup>577</sup> "If for some musicians the art is in the performance, then for other the pleasure is in the profit," David Grazian writes. Hart and Spangler are interested in both. Grazian, *Blue Chicago*, 151.

<sup>578</sup> Although the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) movement is generally associated with punk bands, the argument here is that both Spangler and Hart resemble, or have resembled at some point in their careers, DIY artists and business people. They have produced and recorded their own music (Spangler has released Alberta Adams albums on his label, Eastlawn Records), they have self-publicized and self-promoted their own shows, they have booked their own engagements and sold their own product, and they have remained virtually autonomous in a business, which, as of 2008, was dominated by four major labels, which accounted for "87.4 percent of physical and digital album sales." Alan O'Connor, *Punk Record Labels and the Struggle for Autonomy: The Emergence of DIY* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), x.

<sup>579</sup> R. J. Spangler, interview by author, transcript, Detroit, Michigan, 8 August 2010, 7.

<sup>580</sup> "Kate Hart," accessed 9 January 2011. <http://www.katehart.com/biography.php>.

<sup>581</sup> Kate Hart, interview by author, transcript, Detroit, Michigan, 9 August 2010, 5.

<sup>582</sup> "Kate Hart," accessed 9 January 2011, <http://www.katehart.com/biography.php>.

<sup>583</sup> Kate Hart interview, 9 August 2010, 10.

<sup>584</sup> "Kate Hart," accessed 9 January 2011, [katehart.com/biography.php](http://www.katehart.com/biography.php). David Grazian writes that in order to overcome "the curse" of whiteness, white blues musicians often appropriate black urban culture to establish authenticity. In Hart's case, the association of herself with a record label with an all-black roster with her as an exception means to boost her credibility as a blues singer. Grazian, *Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs*, 144.

<sup>585</sup> "Kate Hart," accessed 9 January 2011, <http://www.katehart.com/biography.php>.

<sup>586</sup> Kate Hart interview, 9 August 2010, 5.

<sup>587</sup> Kate Hart interview, 9 August 2010, 3.

<sup>588</sup> Kate Hart interview, 9 August 2010, 4-5.

<sup>589</sup> Tad Lathrop, with contributions by Jim Pettigrew, Jr., *This Business of Music Marketing & Promotion* (New York: Billboard Books, 2003) 1.

<sup>590</sup> Kate Hart interview, 6 August 2010, 5.

<sup>591</sup> Kate Hart interview, 6 August 2010, 5.

<sup>592</sup> Kate Hart interview, 6 August 2010, 6.

<sup>593</sup> "Detroit Women," accessed 9 January 2011, <http://www.katehart.com/detroitwomen.php>.

<sup>594</sup> Kate Hart interview, 9 August 2010, 1.

<sup>595</sup> R. J. Spangler interview, 8 August 2010, 18.

<sup>596</sup> Charles L. Latimer, "Revival Meetings: Drummer R.J. Spangler Convenes the Musical Generation," *Metro Times* (Detroit) 24 February 2010, accessed 13 February 2011, <http://www2.metrotimes.com/editorial/story.asp?id=14834>.

<sup>597</sup> Charles L. Latimer, "Revival Meetings."

<sup>598</sup> R. J. Spangler interview, 8 August 2010, 6.

<sup>599</sup> R. J. Spangler, "My Story (So Far) – R. J. Spangler's MySpace Blog," accessed 13 February 2011, [blogs.myspace.com/rjspangler](http://blogs.myspace.com/rjspangler).

<sup>600</sup> Charles L. Latimer, "Revival Meetings."

<sup>601</sup> Charles L. Latimer, "Revival Meetings."

<sup>602</sup> R. J. Spangler, interview, 8 August 2010, 5.

<sup>603</sup> R. J. Spangler interview, 8 August 2010, 4.

<sup>604</sup> Alberta Adams, interview by author, transcript, Detroit, Michigan, 8 April 2008, 1.

<sup>605</sup> R. J. Spangler interview, 8 August 2010, 14.

<sup>606</sup> Alberta Adams interview, 8 April 2008, p. 1.

<sup>607</sup> Alberta Adams interview, 12 September 2010, 10.

<sup>608</sup> R. J. Spangler interview, 8 August 2010, 15.

<sup>609</sup> Michael T. Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 175.

<sup>610</sup> R. J. Spangler interview, 8 August 2010, 6.

<sup>611</sup> R. J. Spangler interview, 8 August 2010, 7.

<sup>612</sup> Kate Hart interview, 8 August 2010, 3.



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- <sup>613</sup> Grazian, *Blue Chicago*, 22.
- <sup>614</sup> Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, 8, 27.
- <sup>615</sup> Jones, *Blues People*, 140.
- <sup>616</sup> Hamilton, "Sexuality," 135.
- <sup>617</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the 1960s*, 1.
- <sup>618</sup> R. J. Spangler interview, 8 August 2010, 8.
- <sup>619</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the 1960s*, 5.
- <sup>620</sup> CD Universe, "Detroit Women Rattle Your Cage CD," accessed 13 February 2011.  
<http://www.cduniverse.com/search/xx/music/pid/7194970/a/Rattle>.
- <sup>621</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the 1960s*, 6.
- <sup>622</sup> Barlow, *Looking Up at Down*, 325-328.
- <sup>623</sup> Hamilton, "Sexuality," 134.
- <sup>624</sup> Kate Hart interview, 8 August 2010, p. 5.
- <sup>625</sup> John J. Bukowczyk and Douglas Aikenhead, eds. with Peter Slavcheff, *Detroit Images: Photographs of the Renaissance City* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 15-23.
- <sup>626</sup> Seattle Women, accessed 15 January 2011, <http://www.katehart.com/seattlewomen.php>.
- <sup>627</sup> Bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representation* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 102-103.
- <sup>628</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City NY: Anchor Books, 1959), quoted in Grazian, *Blue Chicago*, 11.

## Chapter Six

## Singing it for the Second Time: The Resurgence of Detroit's Queen of the Blues, 1960-2000

After enjoying some of the best years in her career in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Alberta Adams felt that Detroit, in the remainder of the 1960s, did not have much to offer her.<sup>629</sup> The 1960s, a decade in which rock, rhythm-and-blues, and soul overshadowed the blues, started with promise for Adams, who in 1962 released a single containing "I Got a Feeling" and "Without Your Love," on Thelma Gordy's Thelma Records label out of Detroit.<sup>630</sup> She performed frequently at Detroit's upscale nightclubs like the 20 Grand, the Alvito Bar, and Phelps Lounge, the latter being one of the most popular black music clubs to open in Detroit in the early 1960s. Later in the decade, Alberta Adams occasionally performed at some of the city's top black nightclubs, but new acts and sounds were moving in to take her place. Nevertheless, she doggedly pursued her career during the latter years of the 1960s and the 1970s, a period that saw other musical genres, such as funk and disco, catch the attention of black listeners.<sup>631</sup> Adams's climb back to her former status in Detroit did not really begin until the 1980s, when she was one of few women and jump blues artists performing on the Mississippi Delta-based and predominantly male Detroit blues scene. By the 1990s, and with the help of an astute and well-connected band member, promoter, and manager, R. J. Spangler, Alberta Adams reached a point in her career that she described as "a dream come true."<sup>632</sup> Although an international blues revival that benefited many of Detroit's blues artists accompanied Alberta's resurgence, Adams had much to do with her newfound success. Her tenacity, her dedication, and her still vibrant performance and songwriting skills allowed her to reassert herself as Detroit's queen of the blues.

By 1966, Phelps and the 20 Grand booked Motown artists and top soul and R&B acts like Solomon Burke and Etta James.<sup>633</sup> Very rarely did the club book a local blues artist like Alberta Adams. Every once in a while, Phelps and the 20 Grand would present nationally known blues headliners like Bobby Blue Bland, Koko Taylor, and B. B. King, but Adams rarely showed up in the advertisements for the nightclubs in the *Michigan Chronicle*.<sup>634</sup> Instead, Adams performed at lesser-known clubs on Detroit's east side such as Blues Unlimited and the Parrot Lounge, as well as the Fox Cocktail Lounge on Detroit's west side.<sup>635</sup> The Blues Unlimited 1966 New Year's Eve show, which paired Adams with Detroit Delta blues stalwart Bobo Jenkins, was notable among these advertisements since it indicated that the divisions in Detroit between jump blues and Delta blues were eroding.<sup>636</sup> During the rest of the year, Blues Unlimited, which advertised having the "best in the blues," relegated the blues to Monday nights. On Blue Mondays, the club presented an array of mostly male Detroit blues stars, with the exception of Adams, that included John Lee Hooker, Little Sonny and his Rhythm Rockers, Mr. Bo, and the Joe Weaver Band.<sup>637</sup> The Blues Unlimited's blend of blues music and rhythm-and-blues may have seemed incongruous to some whites, but some black audiences, which in many cases heard one style of music in the other and vice versa, may have welcomed this variety.<sup>638</sup>

By 1970, the black club scene in Detroit had reinvented itself again in terms of new clubs and locations, but Adams did not benefit from the changes. Well-established clubs, such as the 20 Grand, continued to book Motown acts as well as acts like Detroit's soul/funk innovators Parliament Funkadelic. Phelps reserved most of its dates for soul and R&B acts, but still saved room for the occasional appearance by blues artist Bobby Blue Bland, a soul blues artist who remained very popular with black audiences.<sup>639</sup> Watts Club Mozambique and Ben's Hi Chaparral joined the surviving headliner clubs and brought in Detroit soul artists like Bettye

Lavette, The Monitors, Ivy Hunter, and McKinley Jackson, as well as local blues artist Little Sonny.<sup>640</sup> In March of 1970, Adams, billed as the Queen of the Blues, played another Blue Monday show at the Metropole Lounge on Chene near East Grand Boulevard.<sup>641</sup> Ethel's Cocktail Lounge on Mack occasionally booked blues acts. However, Ethel's booked R&B and soul acts primarily and maintained a reputation of being one of the city's top disco dance clubs by offering dance between band sets on the weekends and dance nights throughout the week. Blues artists such as Little Milton, Esther Phillips, and Albert King surface in *Michigan Chronicle* advertisements for Ethel's in 1980.<sup>642</sup> Alberta Adams returned to Phelps Lounge in November of 1980.<sup>643</sup> Despite an apparent lack of work in Detroit, Alberta said that she continued to obtain out-of-town bookings throughout these lean decades, playing regularly in cities like Ann Arbor, Chicago, Philadelphia, Nashville, Cincinnati, and New York.<sup>644</sup> In the 1960s, she toured extensively with blues artist Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson.<sup>645</sup> Remarking on what venues existed for her to play in Detroit in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, Adams said, "There really wasn't too much of nothing."<sup>646</sup>

Although Detroit's black club scene appeared to grow tired of the blues in the 1960s, blues activity picked up in the 1970s with Detroit's electric Mississippi-Delta-style blues players, who starred in Detroit area blues festivals that were just getting underway. The white baby boomer generation's interest continued to rise and bolstered attendance at the festivals.<sup>647</sup> Depending upon one's perspective, these white groups and solo artists either offered a sacred tribute to American blues artists or simply appropriated their music. All the above helped galvanize interest in the blues amongst the white youth and the emerging 1960s counterculture of the United States.<sup>648</sup>

Alberta Adams speaks of herself as fitting squarely within an authentic African American blues tradition and while she does not demean white players, some of whom she has shared stages with, she does seem to see them as interlopers into territory that African Americans once “owned.” Expressing a sense of disappointment with the apparent lack of interest contemporary black musicians have in playing the blues, Adams said, “At one time, the white man, or I want to say white people, didn’t know what blues was . . . now . . . [the] white boys is singing the blues, and playing it. In fact, they’re taking it from us . . . we are not doing anything with the blues as of now.” Nevertheless, Adams would be the first to admit that she has benefited from the racial shift in blues audiences as well as the infringement of white musicians on the blues. At the time of her interviews, Adams’s band members were all white and she was quick to praise them.<sup>649</sup>

In the early 1990s, the shift from vinyl to compact disc driven primarily by music manufacturers, the establishment of new venues, and the emergence of other blues-related ventures raised commercialism related to blues music to a new level, and this hyper-commercialization had a trickle-down effect on Detroit blues artists like Adams. The concerted move on the part of the music industry decision makers to switch from one format to another resulted in significant sales for old blues re-releases, which were repackaged and remarketed as boxed sets, double-, triple- and quadruple-compact disc sets, and countless other “new” products that had mostly been previously released.<sup>650</sup> Entrepreneurial business ventures related to blues music, such as the House of Blues, which over the course of the decade became a chain of concert halls and restaurants designed to “recreate the ambience of a funky juke joint, but at the cost of a million dollars,” also came to life in the 1990s.<sup>651</sup> The House of Blues, dreamt up by Hard Rock Café inventor Sam Tigaret, “did not start these trends; rather, it [became] their latest, slickest extension.”<sup>652</sup> In 1992, former Kansas City club owner and promoter Roger Naber

initiated the Legendary Rhythm and Blues Cruise. Naber, who in essence appropriated the idea from a smaller blues cruise launched in 1991, chartered an ocean liner, enlisted a multitude of blues and rhythm-and-blues performers to take aboard, and invited fans of blues music to take a Caribbean cruise whose ports of call included Aruba and the Bahamas.<sup>653</sup> Once admired by white blues purists for its simplicity and relative exclusivity, blues music in the 1990s was reaching out to an ever-widening swath of consumers.<sup>654</sup>

The first local signs in Detroit of recognition for Alberta Adams may have come earlier, but it is certain that by 1996 Adams was garnering increased attention.<sup>655</sup> A 1996 article written by George Seedorff in *The Michigan Chronicle* indicated that the Detroit Blues Society nominated Alberta Adams for a lifetime achievement award, which she won in early 1997.<sup>656</sup> *Detroit Blues Magazine*, a quarterly magazine launched in 1995 by publisher Robert Jr. Whitall, put Alberta Adams on the cover of the fall 1996 issue, and a lengthy feature article about Adams was included inside the magazine. The headline of George Seedorff's feature story on January 31, 1996, in the entertainment section of *The Michigan Chronicle* read, "Alberta Adams: Still the Queen of the Blues in the Motor City." For the most part, the story recounted Alberta Adams's early days in show business, but it also filled in some of the holes present in Detroit's blues history. Seedorff's article devoted space to some of Adams's beliefs about blues music and the blues in general. She believed that blues music artists focused on life issues and reality in their work. She also spoke of the spiritual power of the blues, which she said tended to promote freedom. "Truth is, we all get the blues," said Adams, who added that, "The blues is about freedom and finding a way to be free, even when it sometimes seems hopeless."<sup>657</sup>

In 1997, the Minnesota-label, Cannonball Records released the first new recordings by Alberta Adams since her 1960s recording for Thelma Records. The compact disc, called "Blues

across America – the Detroit Scene,” was a compilation album of sorts featuring Adams, the Butler Twins, and Johnnie Bassett, who each did four songs on the album.<sup>658</sup> Its release, albeit on a small independent label, indicated that the Detroit Blues Scene once again merited national and international attention. It was not until 1999 that Cannonball released Alberta’s first solo compact disc, *Born with the Blues*, and 1999 was the year when things really began happening for her. Besides her solo compact disc, material by Alberta that was buried since the 1950s appeared on two high profile compilation albums, *T. J. Fowler and his Rockin’ Jump Band (featuring Calvin Frazier)*, and the MCA/Chess compilation, *Women Blues Singers*.<sup>659</sup>

In the late 1990s, Adams’s manager, R. J. Spangler, began booking her on the festival circuits of the United States and Canada and Adams enjoyed her time on the road. According to Spangler, the reception given to Adams all over the United States and Canada pleased her to no end. “My dream come true,” Adams said. “I always wanted to be in show business and I wound up being nationwide. I’m all over.”<sup>660</sup> Spangler said that the first time Alberta appeared at the New Daisy Theater on Beale Street in Memphis, photographers fell over themselves to get her picture because it had been years since she had appeared in Memphis. “People were shocked. These photographers just ran out like paparazzi,” he said.<sup>661</sup> In 2000, Cannonball followed up its release of “Born with the Blues” with another full-length compact disc titled “Say Baby Say.” Adams continued to cross the continent, from New York to San Francisco and from Vancouver to Montreal. She turned down an offer to tour in Europe due to her fear of flying. “There’s too much water,” she said.<sup>662</sup> Adams was meeting friends she never knew she had and loving it at eighty-three years old. She preferred the road to playing in Detroit, indicating like the modern Detroit blues women she had helped to mentor, that she really found little respect and little in the way of financial rewards in what had become her hometown. “Detroit, we ain’t got it,” Adams

said. “I don’t care where I worked at on that road, there were beautiful people. They come up to you and tell you they enjoyed you.”<sup>663</sup> Releasing CDs and touring to support them, Adams felt successful again.

Acknowledgement streamed in for Detroit’s queen of the blues, who graciously received such attention; in spite of her having already spent five decades in show business, she had “made it” all over again. Although nominated for the Blues Foundation’s prestigious W. C. Handy awards in 2001, 2002, 2003 in the category of Traditional Blues – Female Artist of the Year, Adams lost every year to Koko Taylor, Chicago’s Queen of the Blues. Adams said she thoroughly enjoyed coming to Memphis for the awards ceremony.<sup>664</sup> “When I was in Memphis, Tennessee, and all the big time musicians, and all these other big time lady singers, and I sit there and look at them, I say “Wow,” and they were sitting there looking at me saying “Who is she,” you know. But I made it with them.”<sup>665</sup> By 2002, Cannonball Records went out of business and R. J. Spangler and a partner started their own label, Eastlawn Records. Spangler’s Eastlawn issued Alberta’s *Live AA* in 2002 and *I’m on the Move* in 2003. That made for four full-length compact disc releases in five years – each containing some of Alberta Adams’s own compositions. Each new release meant more songwriting and more roadwork, but Adams was energized and willing to do the work. “[W]hen you cut a CD, you can’t just cut that CD and leave it right on the shelf,” Adams said. “You got to put it out there and you got to follow it . . . that’s how I made it.”

After nearly sixty years in show business, Adams had a desire to travel that had evaporated when she was younger after she had several bad experiences in the Jim Crow South. Travel in her new career had helped her attain the state of freedom with the blues that she had been professing for most of her life.<sup>666</sup> Besides freedom and liberation, travel can represent



power, provide a reason for self-affirmation, or symbolize status for a female blues singer.<sup>667</sup> Having journeyed in the Jim Crow South, however, Alberta Adams developed a reluctance to travel.<sup>668</sup> For African American women from the North, travel in the South in the 1940s and 1950s was hazardous, at worst, and discomforting at best, when the women found it difficult to procure food and temporary lodging.<sup>669</sup> It is not difficult to imagine that such experiences would contradict any ideas of liberation, yet in the late 1990s, Adams again became excited about travel. She was on the road with a band, sometimes with another blues woman, and a woman who paid attention to her personal needs. Travel became rewarding and something to reflect on when she came back to Detroit. “I lay at home and I look at the map, like for the weather,” Adams said. “And I say, ‘I’ve been to all those places . . . all down in Key West, Phoenix. Yep. California. We’ve been all over. I’ve been everywhere.’”<sup>670</sup>

Although Adams’s associating freedom with the blues is not new and is often repeated by other blues artists, her acknowledgment of that relationship provides some insight into what many blues queens have represented to others and to themselves. The blues women of the 1920s, admired for their wisdom and professed expertise in worldly ways, brought a new sense of reality to vaudeville stages, and a new sense of freedom that fans could aspire to and admire.<sup>671</sup> In the 1990s, Adams was a role model and an advisor to several younger blues women and a new flock of fans. Like a minister, or more precisely, like a blues woman, Adams preached of love, relationships, and reality. In accordance with the African American experience in the United States, all of those subjects reflected a collective will to freedom, denied to enslaved and emancipated African Americans.<sup>672</sup>

For Adams, her reality is synonymous with the music she sings. She believes in the blues, which is the main theme of the “story” she tells when she sings. She advises listeners to

accept as fact what her own life has taught her to accept. The blues are omnipresent and real, even though they may lay dormant at times. She bases her consciousness of the blues on her own experience, which in a larger sense relates to the African American experience in the United States. “I let them know what the blues is all about, because not a day goes by that I don’t have the blues,” Adams said. “Ain’t going to be no day, no two days alike, but there is blues every day in your life.”<sup>673</sup>

Bringing in New Year 1997 with Chicago Blues Queen KoKo Taylor at Ferndale’s Magic Bag Theater, Detroit blues guitarist and singer B. B. Queen enthusiastically shouted, “Move over hip hop. There’s a blues explosion happening right now and women are a big part of it.” Detroit blues women apparently were playing a bigger role than ever before in Detroit’s 1990s blues revival. Apart from Adams’s success, Detroit blues women like Thornetta Davis, Mimi Harris, Joce’lyn B, Areleen Orr, and Priscilla Price enjoyed a spike in local attention.<sup>674</sup> In 1997, *Michigan Chronicle’s* “Reflections” columnist Steve Holsey gave passing mention to Alberta Adams who he named as part of Detroit’s A-Team of female vocalists. While Holsey, who listed Adams alongside Anita Baker, Della Reese, Diana Ross, and others, may have been merely compiling a list of Detroit female vocalists with “A’s” in their names, the attention to Alberta Adams can be interpreted only as an honor, especially considering the first-rate singers with whom Holsey grouped her.<sup>675</sup> Adams received another honor from her female peers in November of 1997 when the Detroit Blues Society presented “Women of Detroit Blues” at the Scarab Club in Detroit’s museum district. Prior to the show, both Thornetta Davis and Joce’lyn B, second and third on the bill respectively, told Seedorff that they were there because of the mentoring and inspiration of Adams.<sup>676</sup> In his November 12, 1997 column, Seedorff attributed a blues-gospel fusion to Davis and Joce’lyn B, and described Adams’s music as a “sophisticated,

world-wise, uptown style of jazzy jump blues.”<sup>677</sup> The style of music that Seedorff ascribed to Adams was the style of music propagated by Detroit’s blues women of the 1940s.

Although still overshadowed by their male counterparts, it nonetheless appeared that women were drawing more attention to themselves in the Detroit 1990s blues scene. However, both Seedorff’s columns and Robert Jr. Whitall’s *Detroit Blues Magazine* focused primarily on male performers. Of the approximately twenty-eight feature articles on blues musicians written by Seedorff from the latter part of 1996 to early 1998, only five were about women.<sup>678</sup> The *Detroit Blues Magazine* also focused on masculinity in the blues. Out of eleven cover stories that ran under the banner of *Detroit Blues Magazine*, one, which featured Alberta Adams, was devoted to a blues woman.<sup>679</sup> Several Detroit blues women other than Adams, including B. B. Queen, Thornetta Davis, Joce’lyn B, Orthea Barnes, Mimi Harris, Areleen Orr, and Priscilla Price, could have been featured blues artists.<sup>680</sup>

Like Adams’s songs, the songs of the 1920s blues queens sought in many cases to ground listeners in reality.<sup>681</sup> Market-driven and commercial, the songs of the blues queens were akin to popular hit records in later decades. Consequently, some blues scholars discount the authenticity of the music of the blues queens.<sup>682</sup> However, the songs were meaningful to the migrants of the Great Migration. Referring to Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues,” blues scholar Paul Oliver speculated, “[I]t had meaning for every African American who listened to it.”<sup>683</sup> The scouting work done by the blues women during the Great Migration was especially useful to the young, single women from rural areas in the South who considered a move up north.<sup>684</sup> Alberta Adams has clung to that storyteller tradition. “You write a tune, and it tells a story, like, ‘I was born with the Blues,’ ‘Blues Been Good to Me,’ you know, ‘I Paid My Dues,’ I’m telling a story.”<sup>685</sup>

The songs also targeted social issues, such as the legal system as it affected African Americans, poverty, drug abuse, and alcoholism, as well as highly personal issues, such as human relationships. Their attention to things that generally went unmentioned drew the blues queens closer to their listeners. The blues women themselves wrote many of those songs, and while male Tin Pan Alley songwriters, both black and white, also provided songs, the female singers who delivered them transformed them into songs sung from a woman's perspective.<sup>686</sup> The women were storytellers, and whether their stories were joyful, sad, or somewhere in between, a substantial audience that has lasted until the present has welcomed and perhaps benefited from those stories.<sup>687</sup>

Blues scholars often marginalize, conflate into a single dimension, or over-generalize blues written and sung by women despite the multiple dimensions of women's blues. Blues historians Charles Keil and Albert Murray argue that both male and female performers used "men's" and "women's" blues interchangeably and simply switched gender references in the songs when they performed. Poet/writer Langston Hughes wrote extensively on blues music and in an interview recorded in the 1980s left his impressions on what he thought differentiated men's from women's blues. He defined men's blues as primarily economic blues: being broke, being hungry, and being out of work. Women's blues, according to Hughes, were mostly about love: a woman singing about a man who has gone off and left her, for example.<sup>688</sup> Apart from the near certainty that a woman singing about a man who has gone off and left her would have an economic meaning as well as a meaning based upon the subject of love, there are manifold dimensions to women's blues. The above arguments are true to some degree, but they do not take into account a woman's capacity to interpret a man's song from a woman's perspective and transform the meaning of the song in the process.<sup>689</sup> In addition, simply by changing gender

references, the performer could radically alter the meaning of the song, as a love song from a woman to a man, or a woman to a woman, is more than likely to be different from a man's love song to a woman. Kiel denigrates the blues women for having a standardized and formulaic blues form and writes that blues men of the 1920s modeled their blues music on that of the blues women not because they were inspired to do so, but to satisfy the dictates of the record companies and to appeal to the popular tastes of the times.<sup>690</sup> What he is doing, like many other white blues writers, is chipping away the authenticity of the blues women for the sake of a predominantly masculine blues music history.

The blues songs written and sung by women, such as Sippie Wallace, Ma Rainey, Victoria Spivey, Bessie Smith, and many others, throughout the 1920s attest to a difference between blues music performed and written by women and blues performed and written by men. It is hard to imagine how a black male blues artist would perform a plausible switch of gender on Ma Rainey's "Prove It On Me Blues," a song that overtly celebrates women's same-sex relationships. In the song, the female subject, wearing a "collar and a tie" and "talking to the girls just like any old man," pursues an errant lover, and reveals her sexual preference in the process:

*They said I do it, ain't nobody caught me  
 Sure got to prove it on me  
 Went out last night with a crowd of my friends  
 They must have been women 'cause I don't like no men*<sup>691</sup>

Contrary to what Langston Hughes said about women's blues music, women did not write blues songs solely about love and sex. They also wrote about life, women's issues, socio-economic issues, their communities, and a complex, nuanced and assertive sexuality that stood in opposition to the male construction of a woman's "place."<sup>692</sup> Bessie Smith's "Poor Man's

Blues,” is a timeless social statement about gross economic inequality.<sup>693</sup> Her “Backwater Blues,” which she wrote and recorded just prior to the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, acknowledges the loss of lives and property and the woes of evacuation that make natural yet also man-made catastrophes so horrendous and stands as another example of a song that eschews the topic of “love” for social awareness.<sup>694</sup>

With “I’m a Mighty Tight Woman,” another song that would provide for a difficult gender trade-off, an assertive Sippie Wallace offers the man of her desires her sexual expertise and her belief that she can do anything in life to which she sets her mind. She is a “jack of all trades,” who can be anything for a man, including his “slave,” but she is essentially a fearless woman who has got nothing to hide, and stands opposed to the patriarchal conception of what a woman ought to say and do—a woman’s place. Wallace concludes the song with the following lyric: “‘Cause I’m a mighty tight woman, and there is nothing that I fear.”<sup>695</sup>

In her “Young Woman’s Blues,” Bessie Smith’s subject refuses to comply with common patriarchal mores that would have a woman settle down before she decided to do so on her own. Instead, and after her male partner leaves her one day, Smith’s subject does not resolve to weep away the hours, but makes plans to go “runnin’ ‘round” and to “run down” a whole lot of men. She pledges to “drink good moonshine” in the process. Despite others calling her a “bum,” or a “hobo,” the woman who gives voice to the song remains confident in herself and hopeful for the future: “See that long lonesome road, Lord, you know it’s got to end/And I’m a good woman and I can get plenty men.”<sup>696</sup>

Blues queens such as Alberta Adams, Billie Holiday, and Dinah Washington have continued to define the power struggles between men and women and to define and redefine relationships. The blues women defined the struggle for power between black men and black

women from a woman's point of view. Daphne Duvall Harrison writes, "The tenuous nature of black male/female relationships lies at the core of blues literature."<sup>697</sup> The historical context and the material conditions that led to the 1920s and 1930s rise and fall of the blues queens have not returned; however, subsequent blues performers have adopted many of the 1920s blues queens' themes and recast them for their own times. The raunchy party song, "Gimme a Pigfoot (and a Bottle of Beer)," written by Wesley Wilson but first popularized and styled by Bessie Smith, has been redone by Billie Holiday, Lavern Baker, Nina Simone, and Diana Ross, four women who represent almost every generation of songstresses that have arrived after Smith's.<sup>698</sup> They sought to redefine their place in that struggle, and they sang to entertain and to impart life lessons they had learned for their experiences. They illustrated in song the differences of interests between black men and women and sought to redefine a woman's place in society.<sup>699</sup>

For Alberta Adams, establishing herself as a "dirty old lady" is comical, but it also conjures what Hazel V. Carby calls an "empowered presence."<sup>700</sup> It is a bit of reinvention meant to carry a middle-aged performer into old age, a time when many elder performers cease to perform. When Adams tells an audience, "I'm a dirty old lady and you better watch me," she is being comical but she is also warning those watching her that she is still a vibrant, ambitious woman who is in control of her art and its presentation. She is saying that she is still a threat and that her audience should not take her lightly.<sup>701</sup> In one sense, it is just another bit of performance, but she is also drawing a line between audience and performer and taking charge of the performance space. Instead of being an old woman who sings the blues, Alberta maintains her individuality with a comic's flair and maintains her distinct image as Detroit's queen of the blues, and establishes control in a performance space. She also impresses upon her audiences

that sexuality is not just the domain of younger women, and she commands attention as the focal point in the venue for the duration of her performance.

Adams has said that a blues performer has to live the blues in order to sing the blues, and that her experience of her own life has earned her the right to sing the blues. She has survived her personal hardships and she lives to tell about them with her music. She believes her talent is a gift from God, yet she acknowledges her unique individuality and stresses that she raised herself. She admits to few, if any, influences. “I got my own style, and can’t nobody do what I do, and I don’t try to copy off nobody,” Adams said.<sup>702</sup> Billie Holiday, one of the most influential female blues artists in the American musical cannon, said much the same thing when asked of her influences: “You can’t copy anybody and end up with anything. If you copy, it means you’re working without any real feeling,” Holiday said. “And, without feeling, whatever you do amounts to nothing.”<sup>703</sup> Adams no longer believes that singers should compete and try to outdo each other. Everyone is unique, she said, “Just do yours. Do what you can do best.”<sup>704</sup>

Adams’s longevity, which accounts for her first-hand experience as a spectator in some of Detroit’s vaudeville houses where she witnessed the performances of blues queens like Bessie Smith, has given her an intimate grasp on the blues queens of the 1920s. She grew up with vaudeville, which, in Detroit theaters, is where the blues queens of the 1920s and early 1930s performed. Adams had multiple encounters with the nationally known blues queens of the 1940s and 1950s who traveled to Detroit frequently because of its reputation during those years as being a hot spot for entertainment. Adams’s travels to many and various cities in the country also helped form her world-view, which, like the blues queens, she displayed onstage in song, comedy, and dance.<sup>705</sup>



When Alberta Adams began performing in Detroit in the early 1940s, the country was in the throes of the Second Great Migration, and the migration of many blacks to Detroit was not complete. The Second Great Migration, which began in 1940 and continued until 1970, exceeded the first in numbers, but unlike the blues queens of the 1920s, who migrated North themselves and spoke directly to other migrants, Adams was not tied to the plight of the migrant.<sup>706</sup> Her own migration to Detroit, in which an aunt took Roberta Louse Osborne from Indianapolis to Detroit around 1920, occurred when she was three years old. She grew up in an urban area, went to urban schools, and performed in urban nightclubs like her contemporary, Billie Holiday. Alberta Adams was a Detroiter, an urban creature who knew little of the South until she traveled there as a performer. In this way, she differs from most of the 1920s blues queens, who had one foot in the then predominantly rural South and one foot in predominantly urban northern cities. However, just as Billie Holiday who, as Angela Y. Davis proves, was rooted in the women's blues tradition initiated in the 1920s despite her categorization as a jazz artist, Adams, too, explores the connections "between love, sexuality, individuality and freedom."<sup>707</sup>

Beginning in the late 1930s, Adams carried forth and embellished the blueprint for women's blues that the blues queens of the 1920s had established, despite the fact that the blues had become a man's world. When she first used her entertainment skills to situate herself in the company of nightclub patrons and theater audiences early in her career, she resorted to comedy to cool off unruly patrons, and to declare herself an equal to the men in the audience. Much later on, when she became the self-described "dirty old lady" for the festival crowd, she also established her "place" as a performer in control of her audiences. She succeeded in music despite an aching consciousness of her own blues, which began in an orphanage shortly after

Alberta was born. Perhaps because of her style of blues and her long history in show business, which led others to label her a blues singer, a jazz singer, a rhythm-and-blues singer and a rock-and-roll singer, purist scholars of the blues might question her authenticity or her place in the larger blues world. That is what happened with the original blues queens. For their alleged commerciality, their use of the erotic, and their alleged novelty, blues women ruffled some male writers simply for subjecting themselves to the exploitation that came with men's ownership of the means of production, that is, a record company, a venue, or a theatrical booking agency.<sup>708</sup> Throughout her career, Adams sidestepped one-sided record contracts, wrote her own material, and maintained her own individuality, while still possessing a connection to the early blues women. Like the lives of the original blues queens, Alberta's life confirmed the self-reliance and assertiveness of African American women in the black community.<sup>709</sup>

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<sup>629</sup> Alberta Adams, interview with author, transcript, Detroit, Michigan, 12 September 2010, 2.

<sup>630</sup> Alberta Adams, "I Got a Feeling" and "Without Your Love" Thelma 45 RPM Ty42282.

<sup>631</sup> Speaking of changing tastes in music in the black community, Baraka writes, "The Negro's music changed as he changed, reflecting shifting attitudes or (and this is equally important) *consistent attitudes within changed contexts*. And it is why the music changed that seems most important to me." Jones, *Blues People*, 153.

<sup>632</sup> Adams interview, 12 September 2010, 5.

<sup>633</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, January and February 1966.

<sup>634</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 30 July 1966. *Michigan Chronicle*, 3 December 1966.

<sup>635</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 1 January 1966. *Michigan Chronicle*, 5 March 1966. *Michigan Chronicle*, 21 May 1966.

<sup>636</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 1 January 1966. Jump blues, which is characterized by a large band and is situated musically somewhere between swing and rhythm-and-blues, was very much in fashion in Detroit and in the country in the 1940s. Well-known performers of jump blues include Lionel Hampton, Louis Jordan, and Lucky Millender. A well-known example of the sound of jump blues is the Andrews Sisters' "Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy." The songs are often joyous instead of sad and heart-rending, which is often the case with Delta Blues, which was originally created in the country with acoustic instruments, but made electric when blues musicians migrated to northern cities. Well-known performers include John Lee Hooker and Muddy Waters.

<sup>637</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 2 April 1966 to 20 October 1966.

<sup>638</sup> See Marybeth Hamilton, "Sexuality, Authenticity and the Making of the Blues Tradition," *Past and Present* 169 (Nov. 2000): 132-160.

<sup>639</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 3 January 1970. Ulrich Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties: A Story in Black and White* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 26.

<sup>640</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 10 January 1970.

<sup>641</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 28 March 1970.

<sup>642</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 5 January 1980. *Michigan Chronicle*, 28 June 1980.

<sup>643</sup> By 1986, Adams as well as much of the entertainment advertisements disappeared from the entertainment pages of the *Michigan Chronicle*, a fact that perhaps shows a decline in Adams's career or perhaps a decline in the Detroit black club scene in general, or neither. *Michigan Chronicle*, 8 November 1980.

<sup>644</sup> Alberta Adams interview, 12 September 2010, 1.

<sup>645</sup> R. J. Spangler, interview by author, transcript, Detroit, Michigan, 30 September 2010, 2.

<sup>646</sup> Alberta Adams interview, 12 September 2010, 3.

<sup>647</sup> As Marybeth Hamilton writes, "Blues revivalists sought the authentic in the black voice and they were by no means the first to do so. The blues revival [of the 1950s] formed a late stage in a long-term emergence of a white public who sought a heightened reality in the realm of song. That phenomenon predated the end of slavery, in the abolitionist cult of the sorrow song, and even in the audience for the minstrel shows, which despite their rampant racism were grounded in a fascination with the vitality of black music, selling them on the authenticity of what they presented. Hamilton, "Sexuality," *Past & Present* 169 (Nov. 2000): 38. A number of factors merged in the 1960s that encouraged whites to seek out authentic blues, and while African American blues did not enter mainstream American culture, its allure to white audiences climbed steadily throughout the decade. The Newport Folk Festivals, which took place annually since 1959 in Newport, Rhode Island, exposed white youth to blues music on a substantial scale. A few years later, blues- and rhythm-and-blues-inspired British Invasion rock-and-roll groups, such as the Beatles, the Yardbirds, Van Morrison's Them, and the Rolling Stones, eagerly absorbed American blues and repackaged it for American youth. There were also rock-and-roll artists homegrown in the United States that pushed blues music, such as guitarist and singer/songwriter Jimi Hendrix, and several white blues artists, such as Mike Bloomfield, Paul Butterfield and rock-and-blues artist Janis Joplin who helped expose young white audiences to the blues. Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties*, 38.

<sup>648</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties*, 4.

<sup>649</sup> Adams interview, 26 June 2008, 24.

<sup>650</sup> Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties*, 138.

<sup>651</sup> Daniel Lieberfeld, "Million Dollar Juke Joint: Commodifying Blues Culture," *African American Review* 29 (Summer 1995): 217.

<sup>652</sup> Lieberfeld, "Million Dollar Juke Joint," 221.

<sup>653</sup> The Legendary Rhythm and Blues Cruise has been a huge success and now has cruises in both the Caribbean and the Pacific. The current prices for a berth in a cabin range from \$2,200.00 to \$9,400.00. "Legendary Blues Cruise," accessed 22 January 2011, <http://bluescruise.com>.

<sup>654</sup> One of the more interesting ventures that came out the blues scene in 1996 was a Monday night Hamtramck Blues Cruise. For five dollars a person, a bus took patrons to four Hamtramck bars that featured blues music every Monday night. The inspiration for the blues cruise came from the aforementioned Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise. Patrons in Hamtramck could "cruise" from bar to bar and get their fill of blues, alcohol, and good times. Because of its low price and its promise of fun and camaraderie, the cruise, launched in December of 1996, had met with some success. Detroit Blues Society President and blues music writer for the *Michigan Chronicle* George Seedorff predicted longevity for the cruise. Seedorff reported more Hamtramck bars— other than the four involved in the blues cruise — that would feature blues on Monday nights, including the then trendy Motor Lounge, which usually featured a mix of punk rock and house music. Seedorff's blues music articles would appear in *The Michigan Chronicle* from the latter months of 1996 to the early months of 1998. Although Seedorff concentrated mainly on local acts, he also wrote on topics such as Chicago's House of Blues club, national blues acts, and blues radio shows in the Detroit area. The blues shows included local blues aficionado Gene Elzy's blues show on WDET-FM, the Famous Coachman's show on WDET-FM, Robert Jones's "Blues From the Lowlands" on WDET-FM, and the nationally syndicated House of Blues radio show hosted by blues brother, Dan Ackroyd, on WCSX-FM. *Michigan Chronicle*, 12 March 1997; *Michigan Chronicle*, 12 March 1997; *Michigan Chronicle*, 13 November 1996 through 14 January 1998.

<sup>655</sup> *Detroit Blues Magazine* widened its scope in 1997 and became *Big City Blues Magazine*. "Big City Blues Magazine," accessed 22 January 2011, <http://www.bigcitybluesmag.com/>.

<sup>656</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 4 December 1996.

<sup>657</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 31 January 1996.

<sup>658</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 2 July 1997. "Alberta Adams," accessed 22 January 2011, <http://www.metrotimes.com/music/artistprofile.asp?id=2858>.

<sup>659</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, "Alberta Adams."

- <sup>660</sup> Adams interview, 12 September 2010, 5.
- <sup>661</sup> R. J. Spangler interview, 30 September 2010, 14.
- <sup>662</sup> Adams interview, 12 September 2010, 5.
- <sup>663</sup> Adams interview, 12 September 2010, 4.
- <sup>664</sup> "The Blues Foundation," accessed 22 January 2011, <http://www.blues.org/>.
- <sup>665</sup> Adams interview, 8 April 2008, 7.
- <sup>666</sup> This is in reference to Alberta stating that blues music is about freedom. *Michigan Chronicle*, 31 December 1996.
- <sup>667</sup> Paul and Beth Garon, *Woman With Guitar: Memphis Minnie's Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 207-228.
- <sup>668</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 30 November 1957.
- <sup>669</sup> Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: All-Girl Bands of the 1940s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 64, 219-224; Adams interview, 8 April 2008, 6.
- <sup>670</sup> Adams interview, 8 April 2008, 2008.
- <sup>671</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 23.
- <sup>672</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 7-10.
- <sup>673</sup> Adams interview, 12 September 2010, 7.
- <sup>674</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 8 January 1997. *Michigan Chronicle*, 5 March 1997.
- <sup>675</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 2 April 1997.
- <sup>676</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 12 November 1997.
- <sup>677</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 12 November 1997. Detroit blues categories, according to Seedorff, expanded at this time to include "rockin' blues," "delta blues," "Uptown blues," and "jazzy blues." *Michigan Chronicle*, 9 April 1997.
- <sup>678</sup> Of the 11 issues of *Detroit Blues Magazine* published prior to the magazine's changing its name to *Big City Blues*, the only cover story on a woman was the fall 1996 cover story on Alberta Adams. Adams was one of five Detroit blues women about whom Seedorff wrote feature-length articles. The others were Zakiya Hooker, who was featured along with her father, John Lee Hooker, Detroit blues singer Karen Lawrence, who was known as Zoom, Priscilla Price, and B.B. Queen. "Big City Blues Magazine," accessed 22 January 2011, <http://www.bigcitybluesmag.com>.
- <sup>679</sup> "Big City Blues Magazine," accessed 22 January 2011, <http://www.bigcitybluesmag.com>.
- <sup>680</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, 5 March 1997. *Michigan Chronicle* 12 November 1997.
- <sup>681</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 23.
- <sup>682</sup> Ngana tamu Lewis, "In a Different Chord: Interpreting the Relations among Black Female Sexuality, Agency, and the Blues," *African American Review* 37 (winter, 2003): 600. Marybeth Hamilton writes that there is virtual unanimity among male blues scholars that, as blues scholar William Barlow put it, "there is clear difference between the 'vaudeville-based novelty songs featuring graphic metaphors for sexual activity' and the 'more authentic floating folk lyrics from the black oral tradition'" In the hands of the commercial record industry, Barlow admits that "Savory sexual metaphors were not uncommon in the black oral tradition," but then argues "but once the race recording industry got involved, the material was often used to titillate prospective record buyer." Hamilton, "Sexuality," 134.
- <sup>683</sup> Paul Oliver, *Broadcasting the Blues: Black Blues in the Segregation Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 59.
- <sup>684</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 64.
- <sup>685</sup> Adams interview, 8 April 2008, 10.
- <sup>686</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 9.
- <sup>687</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 70-111.
- <sup>688</sup> Lewis, "In a Different Chord," 600.
- <sup>689</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 70.
- <sup>690</sup> Lewis, "In a Different Chord," 600.
- <sup>691</sup> Gertrude Rainey, "Prove It On Me Blues," in Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 238.
- <sup>692</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 11.
- <sup>693</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 327.
- <sup>694</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 263.
- <sup>695</sup> Sippie Wallace, "I'm a Mighty Tight Woman," in Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 132-133.
- <sup>696</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 356.
- <sup>697</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 73.

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<sup>698</sup> “Gimme a Pigfoot,” accessed 25 January 2011.

[http://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=gimme+a+pigfoot&aq=f](http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=gimme+a+pigfoot&aq=f).

<sup>699</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 41.

<sup>700</sup> Carby, *Cultures in Babylon*, 8.

<sup>701</sup> Adams interview, 12 September 2010, 7.

<sup>702</sup> Alberta Adams interview, 8.

<sup>703</sup> Lewis, “In a Different Chord,” 603,

<sup>704</sup> Adams interview, 12 September 2010, 6.

<sup>705</sup> Adding additional meaning to this role would not only be within the province of music industry people, or even just of women, but also of African American writers and poets, such as Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, Gayl Jones and Alice Walker, who, throughout the years, took the raw material of female blues singers and forged for them a type, which reinforced notions that the blues queen embodied the freedom to travel, to openly display her sexuality and to adorn herself in whichever way she wanted, and to speak her mind in ways that could only spark envy and admiration in her fans. Of course, just as performers like Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Sippie Wallace are each unique individuals in their own right, which is one of the main prerogatives of the blues women and women’s blues, Alberta Adams does not exactly fit this type.

<sup>706</sup> From 1940 to 1950, Detroit’s black population doubled, increasing from 149,119 in 1940 to 300,506 in 1950. In comparison, approximately 140,000 blacks migrated to Detroit from 1910 to 1930. Melvin G. Holli, ed., *Detroit* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1976), 271.

<sup>707</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 162.

<sup>708</sup> Hamilton, “Sexuality,” 134.

<sup>709</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 121-122.

## Conclusion

Sippie Wallace's career flourished in the 1920s when blues women dominated the field of the blues. Her fame would rise again with the blues revival of the 1960s, when white blues aficionados, white blues musicians, and white members of the counterculture more or less took control of the medium of blues music, and began to rediscover African American blues artists. In between Wallace's two full-time stints as a blues singer, the pianist and blues singer played and sang sacred music, and issued two albums of blues music while residing in Detroit. In her first incarnation, Wallace performed to African American audiences and derived songs like "I'm A Mighty Tight Woman" from black working-class culture, added her individual point of view, and knit them back into that culture through her recordings and live appearances on the black vaudeville circuit. In her 1960s return to show business, Wallace appeared on the television show, *The Today Show*, and became a cultural treasure for nearly all-white audiences in Copenhagen, London, and Berlin, as well as Detroit, Ann Arbor, and New York City.<sup>710</sup> In the forty years that separated Wallace's two go arounds in the spotlight, Sippie's music did not change much, but the world of blues music had changed radically.

Wallace, who called Houston, New Orleans, Chicago, and finally, Detroit, home, demonstrated with her life and with her songs the deep relationship between the blues queens of the 1920s and the Great Migration, and how wedded the songs of the 1920s blues queens were to the black working-class culture of that time.<sup>711</sup> From the 1960s to the 1980s, she embarked on a different type of migration that took her and her music across boundaries of race, class, and gender. During that same period, Wallace presented part of black working-class culture--embodied in her and in her music--to entirely different audiences, which received much of

Sippie's message not as experiences applicable to their own lives, but as tales and stories coming from a culture alien to their own.<sup>712</sup>

Wallace was notable for her insistence that women could perform both blues music and sacred music, despite her church's sanction against women performing secular music in public. According to Daphne Duval Harrison, breaking the sacred/secular barrier in music was Wallace's "bold move."<sup>713</sup> Wallace, along with other survivors of the 1920s, such as Alberta Hunter and Victoria Spivey, was also notable for sustaining the rebellious tone and spirit of the 1920s blues queens. She was among the many woman blues singers of that decade who struggled for individual and collective liberation during a time of great social upheaval within African American communities in the North and South. Unfortunately, that struggle continued throughout the second half of Wallace's career.

James Grossman describes the Great Migration in *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* as a representation of a then "new African American strategy to obtain the full rights of American citizenship."<sup>714</sup> The blues women of the 1920s participated in and chronicled that migration.<sup>715</sup> As African American women, they struggled not only for "the full rights of American citizenship," but for their own liberalized conceptions of a black woman's "place" in the emerging "modern" social world that gave birth to women's blues. For many of the blues women, "home" was usually in the southern countryside of the United States, and, as migrants, they relocated to unfamiliar and usually northern urban environments, where new concerns, problems and troubles surfaced. With the "classic" blues music or "vaudeville" blues music of the blues queens, performers communicated their perspectives on the great event to their black working-class audiences and shared new freedoms, new hardships and new constraints that came with the Great Migration.

In many cases, the blues women spoke to members of the black working class, particularly women, desiring to leave rural life for the city, as well as to the many that already had come north and found the urban North to be a disappointment.<sup>716</sup> Though relatively few African American women actually headed back home, the idea that there was a place that was very different from the urban area of which they had become a part provided some comfort and prompted the blues women to write and perform songs of nostalgia about the South, or “home.”<sup>717</sup> The blues women’s songs also criticized the North. “Wouldn’t stay up North to save nobody’s doggone soul,” Bessie Smith sang in “Dixie Flyer Blues.”<sup>718</sup> In Smith’s “Work House Blues,” The overworked and exhausted female subject of the song pledges to “get the next train home.” Both songs sent a message to the black working-class women that the urban North was not the “promised land” that the *Chicago Defender* and the industrial recruiting agents described.<sup>719</sup>

Blues women’s songs celebrated and cursed the new urban lifestyle, and they spoke of love and good times and the underside of life represented by crime, prison, adulterous lovers, poverty, and aching loneliness. They warned would-be migrants and those who had already arrived in the city to brace themselves for a lifestyle very distant from the one that they were leaving. Their songs challenged the whitewashing of the South propagated by plantation owners dependent on black labor and by southern church leaders, who either attempted to dissuade workers from leaving their southern employment for the North, or tried to convince migrants already located in the North to return to their southern “home.”<sup>720</sup> Although some of the songs of the blues queens presented listeners with nostalgic, overly glorified interpretations of “home,” other more journalistic songs served as part of the informal information networks that developed between northern migrants and folks down south.<sup>721</sup> The southern tragedies related to the Great



Migration, like the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, and the 1915 boll weevil infestation, were not recounted in song by blues women only for melodramatic purposes. Blues women like Smith and Rainey focused on the reality of the Migration, and their blunt interpretations of life on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line stood alongside of the often-misleading propaganda put forth by those in the North and the South who held a financial stake in either discouraging or encouraging more souls to join the Great Migration.

In song, presentation, and attitude, blues women of the 1920s, like Wallace, promoted freedom and independence to the masses of black migrants who experienced the upheaval as well as the social repression of the Great Migration.<sup>722</sup> The blues women or blues queens of the 1920s were among the first black, working-class American women to assert themselves, win a sense of liberation for themselves, and claim the right to freedom for themselves and other African Americans—especially women--following the disappointments of Emancipation and Reconstruction. They reacted to the institution of Jim Crow in the South and to the less formal but very strict system of segregation in the North.

While the blues artists who migrated to Detroit during the Second Great Migration in the 1940s and 1950s were overwhelmingly male, exceptional blues artists like Alberta Adams rose to the top on Detroit's nightclub scene. Adams continued the tradition of women's blues, replete with its emphasis on freedom and independence, but revamped and re-energized under the guise of jump blues, an upbeat blues that incorporated elements of jazz and became the basis for rhythm-and-blues, yet another offshoot of blues music.<sup>723</sup> As the elevation of masculinity in Delta-style blues music became part of the overall Detroit blues tradition, Adams, Detroit's queen of the blues, nonetheless managed to sustain a career in music that would last for more

than seventy years and stood as a concrete connection between the 1920s blues queens and the twenty-first century.<sup>724</sup>

Smokey Robinson, the singer-songwriter who would also become the vice-president of Motown Records, remembered his experience listening to his mother's blues records in the 1950s as "torment or some degrading type of thing."<sup>725</sup> Reacting to that kind of sentiment among black youth, Berry Gordy, Jr. tried to submerge the blues elements that surfaced in his girl groups, and many other groups on his label, as he set out to develop a rhythm-and-blues/pop sound that would achieve universal appeal. Motown treated its female artists as cogs in the label's hit-making machinery, and as strictly singers in the label's regimented division of labor. Motown ghettoized its female vocalists. Those in charge of the label trapped the women in a creatively oppressive system of production wherein skills other than vocal were discouraged. The producers and executives of Motown made every effort to take the blues out of the girl and may have convinced aspiring blues singers in Detroit at the time to change their musical direction.

Through its monumental success, Motown Records may have suppressed the blues as a viable musical endeavor in Detroit in the 1960s, but Berry Gordy and the company's roster of recording stars inadvertently widened the horizons of the blues women who surfaced in Detroit in later years. Thornetta Davis, in deference to Adams it seems, bills herself as the "Princess of the Blues." She also refers to herself as "the funky rock-and-blues diva" because, she said, "she does it all."<sup>726</sup> Lady T, who says her major influences are Aretha Franklin, rhythm-and-blues and soul singer Denise LaSalle, and blues queen Koko Taylor, is not springboarding off a "pure" blues platform. In their performances, these women, who grew up on Motown music more so

than they on did blues music, play a variety of songs that, combined, make up a modern blues performance.

This development of an “inclusive blues” seems as if it was a matter of course. It was and it was not. Its appearance accords with the many reinventions of blues music, but it also entails a new rebellion against what some have determined to be authentic blues. What Detroit’s modern-day blues women call “variety” is indeed “living” modern-day blues as understood by audiences that are both black and white. “Variety” in blues music, as this study has shown, evokes statements regarding authenticity that often locate the “authentic” in the music’s distant past, but for as many people who have said that blues music begins and ends with the Mississippi Delta, others have stated that blues music has always been a work in progress and open to change. Therefore, “classic,” “country,” “urban,” “Delta,” “rhythm and blues,” “variety” are all part of what Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) called “the blues continuum.”<sup>727</sup> The old forms survive in the continuum and the continuum incorporates new forms of blues music and other genres of music with blues roots. Many of the musical categories that apply to blues music have come not from blues musicians, but from persons other than the music makers, such as music scholars, writers and critics, record company employees, or fans. While some writers have dissected and categorized in attempts to define authentic blues, in reality blues music develops and changes over time. It changes with the passing of generations, and it changes when the social contexts that inspire the blues change. Its boundaries are expansive and suited to include the blues music of the past as well as to innovations that might challenge the concept of a narrow authenticity. Muddy Waters spoke of the “old blues” and placed himself firmly in the realm of traditional blues music, which seems much easier to define than the authentic blues.<sup>728</sup> There is more than one type of blues and placing the word “authentic” on one type of blues while denying

authenticity to other types, such as “classic blues,” makes little sense. It is highly suspect that accusations of inauthenticity often fall upon the shoulders of blues women and not blues men.

Despite the issues of authenticity, ownership, and masculine dominance, as well as the pressures of a market-driven music industry, all of which have served as obstacles to women’s blues music, blues women across the generations of the twentieth century have established African American women’s blues in American popular culture. Established prior to 1920, when Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues” launched the female-dominated and commercial “classic blues” era, women’s blues emerged in the South around the turn of the twentieth century. Performers such as the relatively unknown New Orleans blues singer Mamie Desdoumes; Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, out of Columbus, Georgia; Bessie Smith, from Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Beulah “Sippie” Wallace, of Houston, Texas, led the charge, and many others came afterward.<sup>729</sup>

Contrary to being an invention of 1920s American capitalism, the blues women represented a branch of southern African American culture, which, while not extending equality between men and women, granted women positions of power over matters of importance. Both in the church and in the realm of folk medicine, where a matriarchal network of voodoo practitioners earned respect and authority for their knowledge of midwifery, natural medicine, and sacred African deities, women were leaders, as they were to become in the realm of blues music.<sup>730</sup> Although chastised by some male writers for being inauthentic, and overshadowed by the masculine blues tradition, the tradition of women’s blues—with its yearnings for freedom and liberation for the individual and for working-class African Americans as a whole—has survived into the twenty-first century. Moreover, survival has been achieved in a predominantly male world of blues music, wherein not only musicians, but the majority of ancillary others, such

as festival organizers, nightclub owners, blues music writers, managers, and agents, have traditionally been male.

The modern-day blues women are still bearers of a blues culture similar to that of the blues queens of the 1920s, which, with its wisdom, its truth, and its message of liberation, fortifies and comforts many who put faith in it. While the role of the blues queens certainly has changed since the 1920s, the essence of the blues queens that emphasizes independence, liberation, and healing has remained intact. The music of the modern blues woman, which is far from an attempt to duplicate something from the past, nevertheless shows both the continuity and the progression of women's blues from the 1920s to the present. Due to the end of southern migration to the northern states, much of the *raison d'être* that increased the cultural value of the blues queens of the 1920s was no longer valid beyond the heyday of that decade's blues women, but the blues queens of the not-so-distant past and the present fulfill other functions. The blues, from a woman's perspective, means something different from blues sung by men and is therefore unique in its own right. Women still use the blues as a means to define, describe, and find freedom, liberation, love, and spiritual fulfillment.

Defining the blues in all-encompassing terms, such as Wallace's equations of blues music with "art" and "life," and Adams's association of the blues with "freedom," these Detroit blues women embodied, or at least represented, what blues women, as a collective, have accomplished beyond the conclusion of the twentieth century. As African American women and blues music artists, they had helped shape American popular music, and they continued to do so into the 1980s, when they faced competition between their type of blues music and less genuine articles. They continued to portray "life" as they knew it with sincerity and skill. Like the Detroit blues women who began to perform after them, Wallace and Adams, either in person or through

recordings, have survived beyond the turn of the century. They made a place for themselves in a male-dominated industry that sought to marginalize them once the blues queen craze of the 1920s had died out. Through blues music, African American women have struggled successfully to establish an arena in which African American feminist thought and criticism has reached not only African American women and men but also much of the rest of the world.

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<sup>710</sup> Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 141-144.

<sup>711</sup> *The Detroit News*, 9 November 1986.

<sup>712</sup> *The Sunday News Magazine*, 13 June 1976.

<sup>713</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 131.

<sup>714</sup> James Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 37.

<sup>715</sup> Marybeth Hamilton, "Sexuality, Authenticity and the Making of the Blues Tradition," *Past and Present* 169 (November 2000): 148.

<sup>716</sup> Hazel V. Carby, *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* (London: Verso, 1999), 14.

<sup>717</sup> James Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 3.

<sup>718</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 272-273.

<sup>719</sup> Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 16; Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 352; James Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 68.

<sup>720</sup> Lemann, *The Promised Land*, 47; Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 208, 263; James Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 39-40.

<sup>721</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 270; Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 68.

<sup>722</sup> Hazel V. Carby, *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* (London: Verso, 1999), 14.

<sup>723</sup> Marybeth Hamilton, commenting on Alan Lomax's 1993 work, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, says, "The real thing was the blues of the Delta, a personal music of torment and pain." She writes that blues revivalists were of two kinds. "At their best, their interventions broadened white musical horizons and invigorated the careers of marginal performers. At their worst, the fed on what Luc Sante has described as 'a kind of colonial sentimentalism,' an eroticization of African-American despair. Hamilton, "Sexuality," 157, 160.

<sup>724</sup> See Adelt, *Blues Music in the 1960s*, 135.

<sup>725</sup> Gerri Hershey, *Nowhere to Run: The Story of Soul Music* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 5.

<sup>726</sup> Thornetta Davis, interview by author, transcript, Detroit, Michigan, 17 June 2010, 6.

<sup>727</sup> Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), 166-174.

<sup>728</sup> Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 97.

<sup>729</sup> Ma Rainey began performing "what she called 'blues'" in 1902. Bessie Smith first performed with Rainey in 1912, and became a star of her own in 1914. She is known to have been influenced by Rainey. Sandra R. Lieb, *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 3, 16. In 1912, and at the age of fifteen, Sippie Wallace, a piano player and songwriter, went to New Orleans with her older brother George Wallace, Jr., also piano player and songwriter, who went to New Orleans to pursue a career in music. Sippie Wallace lived in and played music in New Orleans until 1918, when she moved back to Houston after Storyville's closure. Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 117-119.

<sup>730</sup> Paul and Beth Garon, *Woman With Guitar: Memphis Minnie's Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 152.

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**ABSTRACT****DETROIT BLUES WOMEN**

by

**Michael Duggan Murphy****August 2011****Advisor:** Dr. John J. Bukowczyk**Major:** History**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

“Detroit Blues Women” explores how African American “women’s blues” survived the twentieth century relatively unscripted by the image-makers of the male-dominated music industry. In the 1920s, African American blues queens laid out a foundation for assertive and rebellious women’s blues that the many musical heirs who succeeded them in the twentieth century and into the first decade of the twenty first century sustained, preserved, and built upon. The dissertation argues that women’s blues, which encouraged women to liberate themselves and seek sexual, social, and political freedom, survived into the twenty-first century despite facing the formidable obstacles of racism, capitalism, and patriarchy.

The story of African American women’s blues in the twentieth century relates to two different types of migration, the first being the very physical and concrete Great Migration of 1910 to 1930 that brought blues music and many southern African Americans north. The second migration was the more abstract, aesthetic, transcendent journey that took blues women, and their blues across barriers of race, class, and gender. Both of these migrations were crucial to the ongoing formation of women’s blues and to the development of the women who sing the blues.

Some blues scholars often emphasize that, with the exception of the 1920s blues queens, blues music has been predominantly masculine territory, in terms of its audiences and performers, and masculinity has become almost synonymous with authenticity in the blues. Female blues scholars, like Daphne Duvall Harrison, Angela Y. Davis, Hazel V. Carby, Sandra Leib, and Marybeth Hamilton, have begun in recent decades to examine and assess both the concept of women's blues and the role of blues women in African American society and in the United States. The concept of women's blues remains controversial, even among some of the women interviewed for this study.

This study also seeks to discount notions that the blues queens of the 1920s, or any era, were, to a large degree, the creation of the music business. They emerged from African American working-class traditions and innovations; the most prominent innovation was blues music itself, which appears to have been a late nineteenth century African American invention that built upon many then popular African American musical elements. Through the world of blues music, African American women and the working-class black Americans who initially supported them, had a great impact on the American music business, which in many ways was forced to adapt to the burgeoning African American market.

A major argument embedded in "Detroit Blues Women" holds that women's power and control over defining their own sexuality through the medium of blues music did not die out following that brief period in which women's blues stood at the forefront of African American popular entertainment. At least within the realm of blues music, black women have continued to formulate and portray a more inner-directed sexuality that both challenges and resists patriarchal, racist, and class-based assumptions regarding a black woman's place.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Michael Murphy is a writer and musician who, prior to earning a Ph. D in history from Wayne State University, was and is a member of several Detroit musical groups, including the Denizens, the Boners, the Paper Hearts, the Hysterical Narcotics, and the Space Heaters, as well as the drummer in Nathaniel Mayer's back-up group, the Shanks. He has also written articles for magazines, trade publications, and newspapers, including *White Noise*, *Black & White*, *Fun*, *Orbit*, *Murder City Comix*, the *Dearborn Times-Herald*, the *Villa Park Argus*, the *Lombard Spectator*, the *Daily Herald*, *Stateline Midwest*, the *Detroit News*, the Observer-Eccentric Newspapers, the *Hamtramck Citizen*, the *Hamtramck Revue* and the *Metro Times* of Detroit. Besides having earned a bachelor's and a master's degree in history at Wayne State, he also obtained an associate's degree from Schoolcraft College and holds a master's degree in history from Northwestern University.