

Blues For Victoria Spivey

By Giles Oakley



In December 1976, *The Listener*, the BBC's venerable weekly newspaper/magazine, previewed the television documentary series, 'The Devil's Music', with articles written by producer Giles Oakley, on Victoria Spivey and Big Joe Williams. Forty-four years on, *B&R* is publishing both historic articles courtesy of Giles, in advance of his extensive series on the making of the documentary series to be published in *B&R* magazine.

It was as an entertainer that Victoria Spivey burst into prominence in 1926. She was friend and contemporary of some of the best-remembered black artists of the time – Bessie Smith, 'Empress of the Blues'; Ma Rainey, 'Mother of the Blues'; Ida Cox, 'Queen of the Blues'. In one sense the lives of these regal stars were far removed from the arid poverty from which the blues had sprung. All had the glamorous trappings of stardom, headlining extravagant shows, touring and performing in tents, circuses, theatres or cabarets. But theirs was still a segregated world, and from the time the first blues record was issued – Mamie Smith's smash hit, 'Crazy Blues',

In those early Texas days, protected by her brothers – “Don’t sit there, buddy,” they would say – she worked with dozens of blues singers famous or unknown: Blind Lemon Jefferson, Moanin’ Bernice Edwards, ‘Houston’, ‘Anthony Boy’ (probably Andy Boy) and others. They would switch from joint to joint: “We got tired of our job, we go on their job, they go on our job and play some.”

MISS SPIVEY SUES

The injunction suit asks that Johnson be restrained from continuing to receive royalties from the compositions while the suit for an accounting is pending. Miss Spivey is represented by Attorneys Robert N. Owens and Emanuel Williams.

Have Killed My Man

BLOODTHIRSTY WOMAN CONFESSES!

"I'm now yep me down
and let me tell ya! He was
as the only man I ever loved!
That I killed him once—
you-down, good-for-awful
father!"

"I told him BLOOD was
in my eye—and he said,
'Wings to you,' 'Blood of gen'
kind-BLADDER! I put my KNIFE
in his!'"

"I'm a mightier woman wa-
man and men's' creed for it
back-side."

And there was a terrible,
gloating howl as she crept
down the stairs wherever
she goes and into her first
bed room, where
BLUES and body are being
talked for BLOOD THIRSTY
SUEZ!



Never Seen So Much Blood

"I've never seen so much blood
before—blood! Don't you see all that
blood?"

O! You are filled with pity for this
poor creature who has been through such
TORMENT! There comes before you
upon the horrible sight of the man she
loved. There he lies—dead upon the floor
dead by nature to his blood. The red
stains of vengeance drive her into a mad
passion. But when the toll was taken
there came to her tortured mind DO
RECOMPENSE!

One More Sniffle

Here she is with "DOPE HEAD
BLUZZ!" There's conflict! That little
woman can't think this way. And feel
how she feels! Just like a bird's' nest.
Just like a bird's' nest. She can't
dove and it is to say. What's that
bird's' nest? It's a bird's' nest!

LISTEN TO WHAT DOPE HEAD
BLUES makes men women see, feel and
hear. Check record No. 5351.

↑

EXTRA!

The story with all its horrors
is sung by

Victoria Spivey

(Exclusive Okeh Artist)

on

Okeh Record No. 5351

Ask for ...

5351
10 Pa.
75c

Blood-Thirsty Blues Dope Head Blues

sang by VICTORIA SPIVEY
with Accompaniment

RACE


OKEH

ELECTRIC

RECORDS

GEM PUBLISHING CORP.

19 West 43rd Street, New York, N.Y.



QUEEN VEE SPIVEY

ANNOUNCEMENT

SPIVEY LP 1001 - LUCILLE HEGAMIN, HANNAH SYLVESTER, VICTORIA SPIVEY with BUDDY TATE's ALL STARS including Eddie Barefield, Dick Vance, etc.

SPIVEY LP 1002 - VICTORIA SPIVEY and HER BLUES with EDDIE BAREFIELD and PAT WILSON (March 1963)

SPIVEY LP 1003 - HARRY DIAL and HIS BLUSICIANS with Hilton Jefferson, Irving Randolph etc. (April 1963)

COMING: BIG JOE WILLIAMS with Victoria Spivey and Big Joe Little Jr.

Queen Vee Spivey
65 Grand Ave.
Brooklyn 5, N. Y.

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Blues & Rhythm 355 8



Courtesy John Tefteller.



Otis Spann, Victoria Spivey and Muddy Waters, 1964. Spann holds a copy of the Spivey album 'Chicago Blues'. From the B&R Archive.

It took some time to persuade Victoria's mother that her daughter should break into showbiz. "Ma, she was one old crucifying lady, she wasn't going for them blues, never no how. And me going on the road by myself; they were old-fashioned, and they didn't, like they go now, let you go out and exploit your talent." Eventually, her mother capitulated, and, after a tearful send-off, the teenage Victoria left. "I got on that lonesome train by myself. Just a poor little country girl. And, honey, I hit St Louis and I walked down the street just like any women."

In St Louis, she swept into the De Luxe Music Store, run by a record company talent scout. "Look, I've come here to make a record." "What record?" "I tell you I come here to make a record." "You'd better go and play it to your dolls somewhere." "Yeah." So Victoria marched over to a piano and 'started a-wailin' 'The Black Snake Blues'.

Needless to say, Victoria got her way; she went on to make a record and it was an immediate and sensational hit. So her recording career began, taking her on the endless and gruelling circuits of theatres and cabarets from New York to Nashville. "I never liked to work one place too long - gets on my nerves, even night-clubs. And I've had night-clubs 'six week' booking, and I'm telling you the truth. I'd be so tired, and so nervous, and so disgusted, I'd almost go crazy, I'd just want to keep moving."

In 1929, Victoria was in the first, full-length, all-black feature movie, King Vidor's 'Hallelujah'. 'The King' sent a man to audition her first. "Raise your skirt," he said. "Raise whose skirt up to whose knees: who you talking to? Let me out of here." "No, I just want to - you know The King." "That's why I hate to go to these Broadway shows, all you men want to see is women's bodies." Victoria smiles: "I hadn't got hip - I was dumb just like this, and I



From the B&R Archive.

didn't know then that it don't mean nothing."

In the '30s, unlike so many Jazz Age stars, Victoria's career was unhindered by the Depression. By then, she had worked with some of the biggest names in black showbiz, and countless musicians had taken up her compositions. She continued working in dance-pavilions and night-clubs right up to a retirement in 1951, when she devoted herself to religion after a family bereavement. A decade later, she stormed back, forming her own record company, 'Spivey', devoted to recording blues by black and white musicians alike, known and unknown. She was one of the first to record Bob Dylan, using him to blow harmonica behind veteran country blues singer, Big Joe Williams. Dylan remained a close personal friend till her death.

Victoria's final years saw her restless and explosive energy undiminished. Her affection and praise for other women was not the least attractive side of her nature, and her commitment to the blues and fellow performers was absolute.

"Do you know where the blues came from? The cotton-fields. And those people were decent, honest people, they had better be, as far as I'm told."

Giles Oakley has written a book linked with the television series 'The Devil's Music: A History of the Blues' (BBC Publications £3). This article (reprinted here as it was published with new graphics) was first published in The Listener, 2nd December 1976.

Thanks to Paul Mooney for retyping original articles.



Victoria Spivey, Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival, 9th September, 1973. Photo: Jim O'Neal.



From the Topeka Plaindealer, 17th May 1930. Courtesy Jim O'Neal.