"I can go way back. I can go back to four years old, never miss a lick. I've been singing all my life."

Blues For Victoria Spivey By Giles Oakley



Photo from Otis Spann's 1967 Bluesway session. Left to right: Otis Spann, Lucille Spann, Len Kunstadt, Victoria Spivey and Muddy Waters. Photo by Dennis Chalkin.

n 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.

Victoria Spivey was a blues singer. She died in the previous October, perhaps the last of the great women stars of the golden age of the blues, the 1920s. When 'Queen' Victoria was born – the date usually given is 1910 – in Houston, Texas, blues was just beginning to take hold as the chief secular music of the Deep South black community. Blues is a state of mind, a feeling, and as a form of music it had taken shape gradually. As country folk music, it drew on the haunting moan of the spiritual, the chants of gang-work song and the lonesome 'field-holler' of the cotton-picker.

The blues emerged at the very time when black people in the South had reached the trough of their social isolation and racial ostracism after the end of slavery. The failure of Emancipation was signalled by the systematic introduction of 'Jim Crow' laws which segregated and disenfranchised the black minority. Sadness, poignancy, regret and sorrow – these are the qualities conveyed by blues at its most pained and melancholy. But blues brings not only relief to a troubled mind: it is a music

exultation, joy, affirmation and pride, an I Have Killed My Man assertion of the will to survive. More than that,





From the New York Amsterdam News 25th January, 1928. Courtesy Jim O'Neal.

became symbols of triumph, tokens of what was possible in an unequal world. Their blues conveyed feelings the solidarity, strength and even

I talked to Miss Spivey a few months before her death when we filmed her for 'The Devil's Music' She was living in a cramped and dingy apartment in Brooklyn, surrounded by mementos of her long career. The night before we filmed her, her window had been blown in by a bitter blizzard which flooded the room and kept her up half the night, leaving her tired and anxious. I knew from several phone conversations that she was a heavy drinker and she could be toughly moody and unpredictable. But she could be extraordinarily thoughtful and considerate, and it struck me that, in moments of repose, she seemed frail and vulnerable. "I just got dumb in the last ten years." she said. "That's the truth. I've got to the place now that I don't want to go no place." But as suddenly as she was down, her darkly haunted and very beautiful eyes would blaze with energy, with anger, or twinkle with humour. The performer's pride was still with her.

She grew up as part of a large musical family, and her brothers, 'The Spivey Boys', had their own band in Texas; "and they were hard rocks to break. conversation was peppered with images of toughness, just as her songs are filled with themes of death, suicide and disease. violence. Her father, himself a

musician, had lost an arm working on the railroad.

Victoria spoke with some warmth about her family, especially her mother, who was apparently "the first Negress that ever nursed behind a white doctor in Houston." When "the pneumonia and all that old crap was jumping around, and that influenza crap was jumping" she could "break that fever" with "some old Indian weed."

Of greater significance to Victoria was her mother's religion. "See, my mother was one of them old sanctified ladies, which I love for that today, because she taught me that love. No matter what they do to me I cry to God: 'Hold me still. You fight my battle.' 'That's what I tell Him, and he does

'Sanctified', perhaps, but her mother never stopped Victoria from playing the blues, despite her disapproval of the music. At an incredibly early age, Victoria was singing at country picnics, in whiskey-houses and even 'hooker houses', mixing with bootleggers, pimps and 'good time women'. The prostitutes would pile tips on her piano as she sang.

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.



One of the many adverts featured in Record Research magazine. Victoria Spivey had a semi-regular column in the magazine called 'Blues Is My Business'.

MISS SPIVEY SUES

St. Louis. Mo., Oct. 19.—Jesse Johnson. proprietor of the DeLuxe Music store, 2234 Market St., well known as a promoter of various activities, is charged with mishandling \$2,463.09 in an injunction suit flied in the circuit court here last week.

The auit was instituted by Miss Victoria Spivey, composer of "The Black Snake Blues" and "Evil Hearted Blues," heard on Victoria records. Johnson, says the petition, formed an agreement with Miss Spivey on June 19, 1926, whereby he would serve her as a manager and in the meantime have her various compositions set to music and copyrighted in the name of the plaintiff. It was further agreed, says the petition, that in the capacity of manager Johnson was to procure a market for the compositions and money derived from the sales was to be paid over to Miss Spivey.

After gaining her confidence Johns-

positions and money derived from the sales was to be paid over to Miss Spivey.

After gaining her confidence Johnson proceeded to "cheat and deprive" Miss Spivey of her compositions and the money derived from the sales, according to the petition. It further alleges that Johnson had the compositions copyrighted in his own name, thus willfully deceiving the plaintiff, He has failed and refused to make an accounting to the composer, the suit also sets forth.

The compositions on which Johnson has been paid royalties are said to be "Bluck Snake Blues." "No More Johnson has been paid royalties are said to be "Bluck Snake Blues." "No More Johnson has been paid royalties are said to be "Bluck Snake Blues." "No More Johnson has been paid royalties are said to be "Bluck Snake Blues." "The Swill Hearted Blues." "Blue Valley Blues." "Spider Web Blues" and "Big Houston Blues."

The infunction 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.

Chicago Defender, 20th September 1928. Victoria Spivey sues Jesse Johnson for royalties in St Louis. Courtesy Jim O'Neal.





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 kird, '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 Victoria's career stars. career was unhindered the Depression. By then, she had worked with some of the biggest names in black showbiz, and countless musicians had taken her up compositions. She working continued 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', to devoted 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. blues Dylan remained a close personal friend till her

death. Victoria's final years 1930. Courtesy Jim O'Neal. saw her restless and energy explosive

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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.



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