

ruth brown

"The House that Ruth Built." That's what Atlantic Records, as a fledgling R&B label in the Fifties, was often called. Ruth Brown was one of the first artists signed by Atlantic founders Ahmet Ertegun and Herb Abramson. In the course of 10 years, Ruth Brown made the Billboard R&B charts with 24 of the more than 80 sides she recorded for Atlantic. Crooner Frankie Laine christened her "Miss Rhythm" in 1951, and that reflected her position as the preeminent R&B singer of the decade.

Brown achieved her status quickly. In 1948 Ertegun and Abramson scouted Brown at the Crystal Caverns nightclub in Washington, D.C., where she had landed a gig after winning an amateur talent contest. The pair immediately offered the 20-year-old Virginian, the daughter of a church choir director, the chance to record with them in New York City. However, she never made it to Manhattan: she was injured in a car collision on the way up and was forced to spend several months recuperating in a hospital outside of Philadelphia. Brown was still on crutches when she first entered the studio, on May 25, 1949, to record her first Atlantic side, "So Long," with Ertegun and Abramson producing.

"So Long" reached Number Six on the *Billboard* R&B charts. It was more about blues than rhythm, a simple but elegant showcase for a torchy voice that seemed much worldlier than a 21-year-old's. Her next single, "Teardrops from My Eyes" was as sassy as "So Long" was stately; the emphasis was on the rhythm and Brown sang the blues with more of a swagger than a sob. Brown topped the R&B chart with "Teardrops" in October, 1950, and the song remained there for the rest of the year. Brown returned to Number One in 1952 with the playfully ribald "5-10-15 Hours," a lover's request for a generous amount of quality time sung in a come-and-get-it voice over a loping, New Orleans style beat.

In 1953, Brown topped the R&B charts again, with "(Mama) He Treats Your Daughter Mean," a tongue-in-cheek lament full of read-between-the-line earthiness.

Despite being a concert sensation and a regular hit-

maker, Brown remained segregated from the pop mainstream. But with "(Mama)...," Brown crossed over to the pop charts for the first time, a rare feat for an R&B singer of that era. That same year, Ahmet Ertegun, under the nom de plume A. Nugetre, penned for Brown "Wild Wild Young Men," an exuberant number produced with Jerry Wexler that had the feel of nascent rock & roll. Brown later tackled rock & roll head on, and made it back onto the pop charts, with a pair of lightweight hits that relied on successful Atlantic formulas.

"Lucky Lips," from 1956, was a Jerry Leiber-Mike Stoller number produced by Ertegun and Wexler with a novelty pop feel. It was custom tailored for the charts, not for Brown's usual style, but not even an amusingly square background chorus could diminish the irrepressible Brown's performance. "This Little Girl's Gone Rockin'" (1958), was more truthful in packaging; this time Brown approached rock & roll with a lot of swing. The song had an impressive pedigree: it was co-written by rising Atlantic star Bobby Darin, produced by Leiber and Stoller and featured a King Curtis sax solo.

Brown enjoyed her last major Atlantic hit, "Don't Deceive Me," in 1959. Brown decided to leave Atlantic Records in 1961, when the label's priorities had begun to change. But she never stopped being Miss Rhythm. As a recording artist, concert performer, actress and musical historian, she has kept her rhythm & blues legacy alive. Brown most recently recorded for Fantasy in a jazz and blues vein. She appeared in the Off-Broadway musical *Staggerlee* and, in 1989, won a Tony Award for her role in the long-running Broadway revue *Black And Blue*.

In *Hairspray*, filmmaker John Waters' affectionate look back at R&B-era Baltimore, Brown plays a tough-talking DJ who uses the magic of R&B to unite the hearts, minds and dancing feet of black and white teenagers. That seemed a fitting tribute to Brown's talents. Neither Baltimore nor the world at large much resembles Waters' hip fairy tale, but the power of the music remains just as strong. - MICHAEL HILL





sweet thunder

A Look at Women Singers in the Early Days of Rock & Roll

Considering the passion that most Americans have for commemorating anniversaries, it's rather surprising that 1990 came and went with almost no mention of the seventieth anniversary of the first blues recording session. Maybe nobody realized it at the time, but that long-ago afternoon in early 1920 when a woman named Mamie Smith waxed "That Thing Called Love" and "You Can't Keep a Good Man Down" for the Okeh label would have far-reaching effects on the world of rock & roll. Any current issue of *Billboard Magazine* shows plenty of women in residence at the top of the pop music charts; Natalie Cole, Madonna, Whitney Houston, Bonnie Raitt, and many others today enjoy incredible financial and artistic freedom and success in the music business. But back then, Mamie Smith's "race records" session was a crucial experiment, the beginning of an unbroken line of women who created a body of music that was universally appealing in its straightforward honesty. Some of these women were better known than others; some spent their lives perfecting their music, while others were one-hit wonders; but each was an important piece of the whole. Separated by then-immovable differences of gender, class and caste from their male counterparts, they had to find expressions of their own; after all, they were prevented by rigid societal and familial demands from taking to the open road with a guitar slung over one shoulder! Not for them the haunted Delta nights at the crossroads or the rowdy urban jook joints. Protected by a series of fathers, brothers, husbands and sons, they were given songs to sing and roles to play. It didn't slow them down much, though. Each managed to find her own voice, whether it was Billie Holiday's tormented torch singing, Patsy Cline's orchestrated twang, Wanda Jackson and

Brenda Lee's belting out of country and rockabilly hits, or the sly, sexy twinkle in the voices of Queen Victoria Spivey, Sippie Wallace and Alberta Hunter.

In the Twenties there were almost as many women as men making records. Classic blues ladies like Mamie, Clara and Bessie Smith (no relation to one another) vied for position with their sisters Ma Rainey and Victoria Spivey as headliners on the tent show and vaudeville circuit. Their lyrics, presented as either straight journalism, humorous allusion, or strange and beautiful poetry, reflected the urban experiences of women of their times in songs about sex, love, fear, drudgery, violence, drugs and death. Then came the Thirties and Forties, when women were mostly relegated to a "chick singer" position, dressed like beautiful dolls and fronting orchestras led by and singing songs written by men. By the Fifties, Ruth Brown, Etta James and lesser lights like Annisteen Allen and Lil Green were charting, and bandleaders like Johnny Otis in Los Angeles and Paul Gayten in New Orleans were discovering and promoting the careers of a number of amazing women singer-musicians.

The piano was a certifiably ladylike instrument, redolent of parlors and living rooms; nobody objected to piano lessons for young ladies even in the restrictive early decades of this century. Who could have predicted that under the fleet fingers of Dorothy Donegan, Lil Armstrong, Camille Howard, Mabel Scott, Estelle "Mama" Yancey, Lil Johnson, Cleo Brown and Devonia "Lady Dee" Williams those eighty-eight keys would churn out red-hot, rockin' boogie woogie and rhythm & blues? Interestingly, the earliest women singers somehow managed to reverse the usual marketplace value system; while Columbia was paying its male blues singing stars a flat

clockwise from top left: "big mama" thorton; sippie wallace; memphis minnie; lil green

rate (there were of course no royalties in those days) of approximately \$15–20 per issued side, most of their female counterparts were getting \$100–135 per issued side!

Beulah “Sippie” Wallace, nee Thomas (1898–1986), had not one, not two, but three separate and distinct careers spanning seven decades. In the early Twenties she was known as the “Texas Nightingale,” played the tent show circuit, and recorded for Paramount as a member of the Thomas family that included her brothers Hersal and George and niece Hociel. Her range of material was aston-

Brother Montgomery and Roosevelt Sykes at the keyboards as her only accompaniment. She then disappeared again until, with the help of longtime fan and friend Ron Harwood and singer Bonnie Raitt, she was gently coaxed into a third career in the Eighties, one which found her joining Raitt on a nationwide concert tour and being nominated for a 1983 Grammy Award.

Queen Victoria Spivey was a landmark on the New York scene for decades. She was born in Houston, Texas, October 15, 1906, and died in her adopted home



alberta hunter with the eli donde band, copenhagen, 1935

ishing, from the hilarious double-entendre song “I’m a Mighty Tight Woman” to the stark despair of “Murder’s Gonna Be My Crime.” The tragic early death of her brother George, who wrote much of her music, led to her early retirement in the Thirties, though she did cut a couple of sides for Mercury in the Forties. Fast-forwarding twenty years or so, we find her being persuaded out of retirement in 1966 and recording again for Storyville, with Little

of New York on October 3, 1976. A fluid piano player and strong singer, she started recording at an early age and traveled all over the musical map, cutting sides for Okeh, Victor, Vocalion, Decca and many more as well as appearing in the first all-black musical film, “Halleluia!,” in 1929. One of her most famous songs was the lurid “T.B. Blues,” which showcased her deep, moaning, bluesy voice. She cut an album of duets with

f e m a l e v o c a l i s t s

Lonnie Johnson for the Bluesville label in 1961, and that same year formed her own Spivey Records with her partner and friend Len Kunstadt.

Memphis-born Alberta Hunter (April 1, 1895–October 18, 1984) sang with many of the best bands of the Twenties and Thirties, including those fronted by King Oliver, Sidney Bechet and Louis Armstrong. She made her first records with the Fletcher Henderson unit in 1923 and 1924 for Paramount. One of the earliest women singers to tour Europe, she spent almost as much time overseas as

in New York from 1938 to 1940, and then quit the music business in 1956 and became a registered nurse. By 1961 she was back, recording a handful of albums and doing a series of clubs, concert dates and even a shampoo commercial! One of her best-known recordings was her contribution to the soundtrack of the 1978 film *Remember My Name*. But her greatest success came at the very end of her life, when a regular stint at New York's *The Cookery* brought her rave reviews, and she became the darling of the hip New York clubgoers.



mamie smith's jazz hounds. new york, 1920

in America during this time; she sang in Nice, France, in 1927, at the London Palladium in 1928 and shared headline billing with Paul Robeson in *Showboat* at London's famed Drury Lane Theater during the 1928-29 season. Returning to New York, she did a number of Broadway shows and revues in the early Thirties before heading back to Europe where she joined her compatriot Josephine Baker in Paris in 1934-35. She hosted her own radio show

Then there was Lil Green, whose "Romance in the Dark" and "Why Don't You Do Right" were big chart successes. During her short life (born in December 1919, died of cancer at age 35 in April 1954) she burned her candle at both ends and in the middle. Her warm, gutsy voice was at its best when the accompaniment was minimal, and some of her finest sides were cut with nothing more than Big Bill Broonzy's guitar and

Black Bob's piano support. Etta James later recorded an atypically moody version of "Why Don't You Do Right" as a triumphant tribute to Green.

Once in awhile a singer came along who made an enormous difference in the lives of those who followed her. Two of these were Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Memphis Minnie. Each came to prominence in the Forties and Fifties, played a mean lead guitar, and each was a tough, outspoken woman. Memphis Minnie, born Lizzie Douglas in Algiers, Louisiana, on June 3, 1897, was a virtuoso guitarist who played like she meant business, wrote no-nonsense lyrics, and sang the blues in a way that made it clear she was the boss. By the end of her life she was confined to a Memphis nursing home, a sweet but vague old lady who received a series of visiting blues pilgrims with great courtesy and accepted their donations with dignity. But decades earlier she had taken "Me and My Chauffeur Blues" to the charts and airwaves, toured the country and recorded for Columbia's Vocalion, ARC and Okeh labels, Decca's Race Records series, Victor's Bluebird subsidiary, Checker, JOB and countless others. One of this writer's favorite Memphis Minnie songs perfectly sums up her feisty musical and personal attitude in four words: "You Can't Rule Me." Sister Rosetta (1915-1973) was the gospel side of Minnie's blues coin, with a sinuous playing style and a spirited vocal ability. Though both often recorded with men (Rosetta with Cab Calloway in 1940 and then the Lucky Millinder Orchestra in 1941-42, and Minnie with her handful of husbands), both were always the headliner and neither would let you forget it. Rosetta, an Arkansas native, was calm and comfortable onstage, whether she was singing at a Holiness church program, at the chic Cafe Society or touring Europe with a blues caravan, reminding audiences in that big, booming voice of her where the soul of man never dies. She knew what was what financially, too; at her outdoor wedding in 1951 there were 25,000 paying guests! You can hear faint echoes of Sister Rosetta's swooping, church-style vocals in some of Aretha Franklin's early sides.

Bandleader Johnny Otis ran a revue-style show, with several guest artists all backed by a superb core band, and among his singers were the great Little Esther Phillips and

Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton. Both are gone now, but each left her mark in a different way. Esther Phillips, like Billie Holiday, was a vocal wonder who could sing blues, R&B and jazz, and successfully blurred the musical boundaries till they no longer mattered. Her "Double Crossing Blues," waxed when she was only 13 years old, was the biggest R&B hit of 1950; she often cited Dinah Washington as one of her influences. Big Mama Thornton made rock & roll her own, recording the scorching original version of "You Ain't Nothing But a Hound Dog" for Houston's Duke label in the early Fifties and giving Elvis the essential inspiration for his later, chart-topping cover. Like the late Big Joe Turner, Big Mama scorned microphones, viewing them as useless nonsense; her powerhouse voice blew the back wall off any place she played, with or without a mike. Alas, both women are gone now, destroyed by drugs and alcohol, but with an enduring musical legacy that can be heard in the later-day recordings of singers like Janis Joplin, Irma Thomas, Bonnie Raitt, Koko Taylor and Valerie Wellington. Other Otis discoveries included Margie Evans, Barbara Morrison and Miss Etta James.

Paul Gayten, of course, had the tremendous Annie Laurie as his principal vocalist for years and also "found" more obscure artists like Chubby Newsome and Myrtle Jones. Backed by Gayten's orchestra, Annie Laurie took "Since I Fell for You," "Cuttin' Out," "Creole Gal," and "I'll Never Be Free" to *Billboard's* Top 10 in the late Forties and early Fifties. Chubby Newsome was a real shouter whose "Hip Shakin' Mama" went to Number Eight, and the lesser known but wonderful Myrtle Jones cut several unreleased sides under Gayten's direction for Chess in the early Fifties.

Tonight a handful of women are being inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame; they're just a few squares in the bright musical patchwork quilt begun several generations ago by their older sisters like Viola "Miss Rhapsody" Wells, Big Maybelle, Little Miss Cornshucks, Varetta Dillard, Annisteen Allen, Dee Dee Sharp, Faye Barnes, Ella Mae Morse, Rose Marie McCoy and countless others, representing the sweet thunder and lightning that women have created since the inception of American popular music. - MARY KATHERINE ALDIN

clockwise from top left: alberta hunter; mamie smith; little esther phillips; victoria spivey



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