

from: { Hayes, Eileen M., and Williams,  
Linda F., eds.  
Black Women and Music  
- More Than the Blues  
Chicago: University of Illinois,  
2007

## 2

### Black Women Electric Guitarists and Authenticity in the Blues

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The fact is, I'm an African American female playing what I do,  
and that is quite a feat in itself. . . . I don't know why there  
aren't that many of us. . . . It's important for people to know  
that, yeah, African American women do play guitar  
and do play blues and rock and roll.

—Deborah Coleman

People are surprised when a Black woman can play the  
guitar like a man. . . . I say, "Just wait until showtime comes."

Then when I go on and come off they say,  
"Damn, I ain't never seen nothing like you."

—Beverly "Guitar" Watkins

Let's get together just you and me  
Let's sing the blues . . . then you will see

Why I'm everybody's favorite, qualified and able  
Everybody's favorite, ready when you call my name.

—BB Queen, "Everybody's Favorite (Qualified and Able)"

African American women such as Memphis Minnie (1897–1973) and Rosetta Tharpe (1915–73) were among the pioneers of the electric guitar. Recording prolifically for three decades in an evolving style, Minnie was one of the most influential blues performers ever to record. She was one of the first to use a National resonator guitar and one of the first to plug in. Living and working in Chicago beginning in 1930, Minnie first used an electric instrument on eight sides recorded in December 1941. Pete Welding cites these records as "among the earliest signposts to the electrically amplified

[postwar] ensemble blues style."<sup>1</sup> Witnessing Minnie in a Chicago club on New Years Eve 1942, Langston Hughes, entranced by the blues she conjured on the cutting edge of the latest technology, vividly describes Minnie's bridging of urban and rural, old and new, downhome blues in the city:

Memphis Minnie sits on top of the icebox at the 230 Club in Chicago and beats out blues on an electric guitar. [She] sings through a microphone and her voice—hard and strong anyhow for a little woman's—is made harder and stronger by scientific sound. . . . Through the smoke and racket of the noisy Chicago bar float Louisiana bayous, muddy old swamps, Mississippi dust and sun, cotton fields, lonesome roads, train whistles in the night. . . . Big rough old Delta cities too. . . . Northern cities, W.P.A., Muscle Shoals. . . . All these things cry through the strings on Memphis Minnie's electric guitar, amplified to machine proportions—a musical version of electric welders plus a rolling mill. . . . Negro heartbeats mixed with iron and steel.<sup>2</sup>

The dazzling guitar work, powerhouse vocals, and riveting performance style of Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the controversial but undisputed queen of gospel blues in the 1930s and 1940s, likewise influenced performers across a wide variety of genres.<sup>3</sup> Mavis Staples says, "I used to love to hear her and see her too 'cause she would come up on one leg and she would just rock it, you know!"<sup>4</sup> A pioneer of the Nashville steel guitar in the 1930s, Tharpe switched to an electric instrument in the 1940s. Performing in a wide variety of contexts—solo, big band, R&B, and doo-wop—Tharpe played the guitar with an unmatched authority and percussive power.<sup>5</sup> Of her early recordings with the Sammy Price trio in 1944, critic Ken Romanowski writes:

Their first release was a huge influence on the budding white and black boogie styles that eventually coalesced into rock and roll. . . . Her guitar introductions and solos certainly sound as if they had an impact upon the guitarists who came of age after the Second World War, with extensive use of triplets against the eight-to-the-bar boogie underpinning, double-stops, and dramatic slurs—all utilized with an uncanny sense of when and where to place each riff for maximum effect.<sup>6</sup>

Tharpe's powerful stage presence and command of the electric guitar is demonstrated in a video of her performing "Down by the Riverside" with a male vocal group behind her.<sup>7</sup> She moves around the stage as if the guitar is a part of her. When she takes a solo, she cocks her head to one side, crosses her legs, and deftly executes a rapid-fire succession of notes. She repeats a riff, then bends a note expressively, lifting her guitar into the air. Moving from

the lower frets and register to high up on the neck, she arrives at another bent note, which she sustains with the left hand while waving her right hand back and forth to the beat.

Today, despite the perseverance and success of women such as Minnie and Tharpe in transgressing the gender divide, the blues is still largely male dominated, especially with respect to instrumentalists, and most especially electric guitarists. As in jazz and pop music in general, there has always been a place for female singers, a smaller place for female piano players, and, more recently, a place for female solo singers with acoustic guitar. But while electric-guitar-wielding blues women slowly gain visibility, African American women like Deborah Coleman, who sing and play hard-driving styles, remain an anomaly.<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that other Black blues women playing electric guitar do not exist. Barbara Lynn and Beverly "Guitar" Watkins, for example, have been playing since the late fifties/early sixties, but only recently have their lead capabilities even been hinted at on recordings. There are also a few younger players, such as BB Queen of Detroit, who with the support of Koko Taylor recorded her debut album in 1997, and child prodigy Venessia Young of Clarksdale, Mississippi, whose talent was discovered and nurtured through the Blues Education Program at the Delta Blues Museum.<sup>9</sup>

While White women blues guitarists from Bonnie Raitt to Susan Tedeschi and Black women blues singers from Koko Taylor and Etta James to Shemekia Copeland have received considerable attention, Black female electric guitarists (with the exception of Deborah Coleman) remain relatively unknown. How is it that, though African American women were among the first to plug in sixty years ago, one critic describes Deborah Coleman as an "African-American Bonnie Raitt"?<sup>10</sup> How is it that a White woman becomes the measuring stick for female guitarists within a Black cultural form? And why are critics so unused to seeing Black women playing electric guitar? Why are they not more numerous and/or visible today?

To address these issues, several important factors must be considered: (1) entrenched notions of authenticity cultivated in blues scholarship and journalism that from the outset have determined who gets recognized, recorded, and studied as well as how they are perceived and received; (2) longstanding conventions about gender roles in music, and in blues and jazz in particular, that from the beginning have mitigated against women's involvement, particularly as instrumentalists; and (3) the diminishing involvement of African Americans in the blues starting in the 1960s, the simultaneous increase in the interest and involvement of Whites, and the issues surrounding these phenomena.

Extending my work on Black female guitarists in the blues, this chapter examines how the discourse of authenticity, inflected by notions about race, gender, class, color, age, and style, pervades the critical perception, reception, and self-presentation of blues performers such that African American female electric guitar players continue to be seen as anomalies.<sup>11</sup> Focusing on four contemporary Black female electric blues guitarists, I demonstrate how dominant conceptions of authenticity in the blues coupled with mainstream constructions of race and gender have ensured that this group remains small and invisible. Moreover, I bring into view and begin to document the creative expression of African American female electric guitarists.<sup>12</sup>

### Authenticity and the Blues

The history of blues scholarship and journalism is characterized by a concern with authenticity and a strict code of what qualifies as “authentic” blues. In an early classic text, *Urban Blues* (1966), Charles Keil dubbed this tendency “the moldy fig mentality.”<sup>13</sup> In discussing why contemporary urban blues had received so little scholarly attention, Keil humorously delineated the requirements for “real” blues implicit in blues scholarship. These same qualities are reflected in a joke that has circulated in varied forms on the Internet as “a primer for singing” or “how-to kit for writing The Blues.”<sup>14</sup> In sum, to be authentic, a musician must be Black, male, old, born into poverty on a farm in the rural South, and taught by a legend on a cheap mail-order or home-made guitar; they must also perform in a rustic, “rough-hewn” acoustic style and have struggled, suffered, and remained broke and obscure. Keil lists these characteristics with tongue clearly in cheek, but current views of authentic blues often verge on the same kind of caricature.

Traditional definitions of blues have justified a lack of attention to women’s blues for many years. Scholars have dismissed women’s blues as inauthentic because women were primarily associated with vaudeville blues, which was urban, professional, theatrical (performed on stages), and glamorous. Since rural blues performers were assumed to be male, women who played rural blues were not “seen.” Memphis Minnie, one of the few whose success earned her notice, transgressed the gender divide by playing the part of the hard-drinking, rough-talking, tobacco-chewing blues *man* and by performing with her male partners.<sup>15</sup> Scholars’ gendered dichotomization and periodization of blues history has obscured the existence of an ongoing sustained tradition of women’s blues—a tradition that has included instrumentalists as well as singers and performers and composers in a whole range of styles, including rural, vaudeville, urban, R&B, boogie woogie, and contemporary.<sup>16</sup>

Traditional notions of blues authenticity are as entrenched today as they were forty years ago. In a 1997 review of an album of women’s blues called *Barrelhouse Women, 1925–1930*, *Living Blues* writer Peter Aschoff notes:

While Evelyn Brickey and Katherine Adkins come dangerously close, both musically and lyrically, to crossing the line separating the barrelhouse from the vaudeville stage, Bertha Ross, Frances Wallace, and Clara Burston are all roots blues singers whose work stands up solidly against better-known down-home blueswomen. . . . Burston and Wallace sing in a strong, gutsy juke-joint style light years removed from the polished, vaudeville-influenced manner so common among blues women singers of the period.<sup>17</sup>

In the traditional blues canon, created largely by White male scholars, “Down-home” (i.e., “strong, gutsy juke-joint style”) singing is valued and considered authentic, while vaudeville (i.e., “polished”) singing is not. These styles are seen as dichotomous, and any mixing of styles is perceived as transgressive.<sup>18</sup> These categories were also implicit in the division of music papers at the 2001 Delta Blues Symposium, where some of the material in this chapter was first presented.<sup>19</sup> Papers were divided into two sessions, one titled “‘Strictly’ the Blues,” and the other, where this paper was scheduled, “The Blues and Beyond the Blues.” The response of one White male to the paper made it clear that the questions, mode of analysis, and subject itself tread upon forbidden ground. The respondent objected to the introduction of what he perceived to be “academic” categories of race, class, and gender into what he viewed as simply “a matter of taste.” According to his reasoning, if Black women guitarists are incapable of garnering an audience, they must ultimately lack the talent. And since these artists did not “do anything” for him, we should not impose our tastes on others.<sup>20</sup>

In her article “Women and the Electric Guitar,” Mavis Bayton demonstrates that traditional gender socialization provides numerous obstacles to women taking up the instrument even today.<sup>21</sup> The genres dominated by electric guitars (rock and blues) as well as jazz have been strongly male-identified. As arenas historically for the assertion of masculinity, blues, jazz, and rock performance have been most resistant to accepting women. While adolescent boys are encouraged and even expected to play guitar as part of their social/sexual identity, girls, who have not been privy to these social spaces, typically lack role models and family support, along with the necessary training and experience.

In terms of gender, women in blues, jazz, and rock/pop have functioned primarily as objects for the male gaze. Female performers have often been hired more for their looks than for their musicianship, typically, according

to a European American standard of beauty, requiring a slim “sexy” figure with light skin. In addition to racism and class discrimination, colorism has been a factor in women’s blues from the start. For example, as Bessie Smith’s first recordings were rejected for sounding “too black,” she was also fired from a show early in her career, the theme of which was “Glorifying the Brown Skin Girl,” because her skin was deemed too dark.<sup>22</sup> African American women have had to negotiate prevalent stereotypes reflected in images like the mammy and the jezebel perpetuated by the minstrel tradition. In blues and jazz, female vocalists have been much more readily accepted than instrumentalists, as there is no external instrument obstructing the view of their body. Piano has been the most acceptable instrument for a woman to play, as it was an essential part of the preparation for “ladyhood” among the White middle class starting in the nineteenth century. Horns have been off limits for women because they distort the face, and drums and the electric guitar have been taboo because they are considered power instruments. The electric guitar has been especially threatening because of its phallic associations and potential for intensity and volume.<sup>23</sup>

In the 1960s, the period of the so-called blues revival, many White college students became interested and involved in the blues. Black blues performers from the past were “rediscovered” and brought out of obscurity and retirement to perform at coffee houses and folk festivals, and Whites began learning to perform old blues styles from records and sometimes from the masters themselves.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, Black young people were drawn in the direction of soul and Motown, then funk and disco, and, finally, hip-hop.

Gaye Adegbalola, founding member of the middle-aged interracial trio Saffire—The Uppity Blues Women, suggests several reasons African Americans in general are not as involved in the blues today:

Number one: it’s just been here and gone. In the same way that rap is here now and it might not be 50 years from now. But it’s here now because the technology is [such] that you can create beats and you can say more with poetry than you can in a song. . . . In the Black community one dance would only be around for a year. . . . I think you have to have music for the dance and I think part of what’s missing in the blues world [today] is the dance. Everything is so technical and crisp . . . and the dance is missing. I think that the blues was prominent too because you had a guitar and a harmonica, and you could bring it to a house party and lots of folks didn’t have big stereos. . . . [Now] you hop into a house party and you put on a disc. It’s changing times. . . . More Black women are starting to come to our concerts, but you would think, given the nature of the material, that there would be a lot of Black women at our shows. . . . What radio station is gonna play our music?

Well it might be a college station at two in the morning. Black folks don’t listen to that.<sup>25</sup>

As the audience for the blues became whiter, the context, function, and aesthetics of blues performance shifted. This trend began in the 1950s, when rhythm and blues transitioned to rock ’n’ roll, moving from the Black community into the White mainstream, where multi-performer concerts in big cities replaced intimate dance-oriented shows on makeshift stages. In the 1960s, blues music began to be separated from the dancing. Since then, an emphasis on technical precision has sometimes eclipsed the centrality of total involvement by performers and audience. And yet, despite the changing color of the blues, there have been and continue to be African Americans interested and involved. Many African Americans, while hidden from the limelight, have been instrumental in keeping the traditional aesthetics of blues performance (call and response, dance, full participation) alive. In an interview, Taj Mahal noted that when he was coming up in the 1960s, “very few of the young Black kids were interested in that kind of stuff [the blues].” At the same time, he insisted “there were a lot” of other Black kids involved.<sup>26</sup> Deborah Coleman commented in one recent interview that “African Americans for the most part don’t embrace the blues.”<sup>27</sup> However, in another interview, she did acknowledge a growing African American female presence in the blues.<sup>28</sup> Like many in Black communities, both these artists reflect a general ambivalence about the historical involvement of African Americans in the blues. Among those keeping the blues alive with their electrifying and engaging performances are Beverly “Guitar” Watkins, Barbara Lynn, Deborah Coleman, and BB Queen.

### Beverly “Guitar” Watkins (b. 1939)

Listen up now people, let me tell you ’bout the headline news . . .  
Red mama’s back in town and sure ’nuff she’s gonna play you  
some blues

—“Red Mama Blues”

You don’t need no shots, you don’t need no pills;  
let my guitar cure all your ills  
They call me Miz Dr. Feelgood, I said hey hey hey  
Well it’s my time now, gonna rock your blues away

—“Miz Dr. Feelgood”

Beverly “Guitar” Watkins is indeed “back in business,” as the title of her 2000 solo debut album asserts, thanks to the Music Maker Relief Fund and

Taj Mahal's endorsement. Actually, she has never been out of business, just out of view, for she has performed professionally since the late fifties, when she first played rhythm guitar in Piano Red's bands—the Meter-Tones, the Houserockers, and Dr. Feelgood and the Interns.<sup>29</sup> In the latter band, she wore a nurse's uniform while her band mates dressed in doctor suits.<sup>30</sup> A caretaker image that derives from the mammy stereotype, the nurse outfit no doubt helped to neutralize the gender boundary Watkins crossed by playing electric guitar in public with a band of men. Back then, she says, "I didn't do nothing but looked pretty and played rhythm."<sup>31</sup> After the Interns disbanded, Watkins performed in a long succession of different bands, and somewhere along the way she started singing and playing lead guitar. Her perseverance seems to have been fueled by her early experiences. "I kept on," she says. "Blues is about just like I came up. My mother passed when I was three months old. I was raised up with different aunties. A lot of people have to drink to play. . . . I don't have to do that, because the blues are already in me."<sup>32</sup> Watkins was also inspired early on by the records of Rosetta Tharpe: "There was something about this woman playing the guitar. . . . It was surprising."<sup>33</sup>

Today, as a leader of her own band, Watkins "surprises" as Tharpe did over fifty years ago, pulling out all the stops and playing the guitar, in her words, "like a man." Peter Cooper describes a 1999 performance:

Beverly "Guitar" Watkins comes out of nowhere. And she's led by a Fender Mustang guitar. . . . She leaps and points the guitar neck and shouts and struts and poses. Then she runs and drops to her knees. . . . [She] gets a standing ovation after each song. Then all of a sudden she turns her back and lifts that red guitar up and over her head. . . . She sets it behind her head and plays it like it's a normal thing for a 59-year old woman to do on a Thursday night in Charlotte.<sup>34</sup>

On *Back in Business* (fig. 2.1) her first recording in forty years, Watkins tells the world that she is here, here to stay, and here to be reckoned with. In typical blues fashion, she "talks back" to her colleagues and mentors as she pays homage to the tradition. The CD's opening song, "Miz Dr. Feelgood," for example, references Piano Red's hit, "Doctor Feelgood," acknowledging her time with him while telling everyone, "It's my time now" to be in the spotlight. At the same time, Watkins tips her hat to soul-blues queen Aretha Franklin and performs a moving personalized interpretation of Red's song. In "I'm Gonna Rock Some More" (by Joe Thomas and Howard Biggs), Watkins gives a respectful nod to vaudeville blues foremothers such as Lillian Miller



Fig. 2.1 The cover of Beverly "Guitar" Watkins's CD *Back in Business*, 2000. Music Maker 91007-2. Front cover by Paul Markow. Photo courtesy of Tim Duffy.

when she sings, "You can't keep a good woman down / Where there's rockin' I'll be around."<sup>35</sup> Finally, in "Red Mama Blues," the highlight of the album, Watkins announces her presence and that of her trademark red guitar, dishing up a good portion of her assertive, no-holds-barred instrumental work.

Complementing the message of the music, the CD's cover photo is a striking image of Watkins, center stage, alone, eyes closed and on her knees, playing her electric guitar through an amp on a corky, sand-colored carpet. Behind her, a dirt road lined with tall cactuses extends back into the desert, purple hills and blue sky in the background. This dramatic image seems to simultaneously embody isolation and visibility, freedom and vulnerability—Watkins center stage in a solo venture on a road few have traveled before.

### Barbara Lynn (b. 1942)

There's no one as great as Aretha, but other than maybe Etta James there's no one even near as good as Barbara Lynn. And no one walks on earth that is a better entertainer. I've been booking her since the first year of the club. Her SXSW set two years ago was the best one of the whole festival.

—Antone of Antone's Blues Club, Austin, Texas

R&B vocalist, left-handed guitarist and East Texas native Barbara Lynn—fifty seven years young . . . reprised her 1962 hit, "You'll Lose a

on stage—these young girls just went crazy—[they] flocked to the front of the stage,” Taj Mahal says. “They were like, ‘Oh my God! You mean you can do that!’ It was nice to see. Because in less than two generations we’ve completely wiped out that women can do stuff. . . . How did that happen?”<sup>69</sup>

## Notes

1. Pete Welding, liner notes, *I Ain't No Bad Gal*, CBS Portrait Masters RJ44072, 1988.
2. Christopher C. De Santis, ed., *Langston Hughes and the Chicago Defender: Essays on Race, Politics, and Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 195–96.
3. Ken Romanowski, liner notes to *Sister Rosetta Tharpe: Complete Recorded Works 1938–1944 in Chronological Order, Volume 2, 1942–1944*, Document DOCD-5335, 1995; Barry Martyn, liner notes to *Sister Rosetta Tharpe: Live in 1960*, Southland SCD-1007, 1991.
4. Quoted in Charles Wolfe, *American Roots Music* (New York: Palm Pictures, 2001).
5. Tharpe is pictured with an electric guitar on the cover of *Sister Rosetta Tharpe: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, Volume 3, 1946–1947*, Document DOCD-5607, 1998.
6. Romanowski, liner notes to *Sister Rosetta Tharpe: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, Volume 3*.
7. Wolfe, *American Roots Music*.
8. Although not primarily associated with the blues genre or with the electric guitar, Joan Armatrading, Tracy Chapman, and Toshi Reagon are Black female composer-performers all of whom sometimes play blues, sometimes play electric guitar, and sometimes really “rock.”
9. John Rusky, “Venessia Young—Singing Like a Bird,” *Blues Revue* 61 (October 2000): 66–67; “Blues Girl, Way Out Front She’s 16, Got a Voice that Sparkles, and She’s from Clarksdale,” *Commercial Appeal*, July 16, 2000.
10. Eric Feber, “New CD Shows Deborah Coleman’s Time Has Come,” *Virginian Pilot*, March 31, 2000, E10.
11. Maria V. Johnson, “‘I Was Born to Be a Musician Too’: Female Guitarists in the Blues,” *Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies* 33.3 (December 2002): 214–26.
12. All too often critics have avoided serious engagement with women’s creativity by focusing on their looks and/or personal life.
13. Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 34.
14. Variants of this joke can be found on hundreds of Internet sites. According to Joe Kesselman (“How to Sing the Blues,” <http://www.lovesong.com/people/keshlam/filk/blues.html> [2006]), it was first published in essay form as “How to Sing the Blues,” by Judith Podell writing as “Memphis Earline Gray,” in the Washington, D.C., publication *Wordrights Magazine* (1997) and subsequently circulated without her permission on the Internet.

15. Paul and Beth Garon, *Woman with Guitar: Memphis Minnie’s Blues* (New York: Da Capo, 1992), 12; Nancy Levine, “‘She Plays Blues Like a Man’: Gender Bending the Country Blueswomen,” *Blues Revue Quarterly* 7 (Winter): 37.
16. Marcus Charles Tribbett, “‘Everybody Wants to Buy My Kitty’: Resistance and the Articulation of the Sexual Subject in the Blues of Memphis Minnie,” *Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies* 29.1 (April 1998): 42–44.
17. Peter Aschoff, “Record Review of Barrelhouse Women, 1925–1930,” *Living Blues*, September/October 1997, 100–101.
18. For a discussion of authenticity in the blues, the intolerance for the mixing of styles and its relation to racial identity politics, see Christopher Waterman, “Race Music: Bo Chatmon, ‘Corrine Corrina,’ and the Excluded Middle,” in *Music and the Racial Imagination*, ed. Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 177–81.
19. Maria V. Johnson and Nathan J. Hill, “‘The Day It Comes’: Turning Up the Volume on African American Women Plugging In,” presented at the Delta Blues Symposium 7, Arkansas State University, March 30, 2001.
20. Nathan Hill, “Postmodern Plasticity and Concrete Practice,” unpublished MS, 6–7.
21. Sheila Whiteley, *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1997), 37–49.
22. Chris Albertson, *Bessie* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), 27, 37–38.
23. For discussions of these issues in jazz, see Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen* (New York: Pantheon, 1984) and Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: All Girl Bands in the 1940s* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000); in blues, see Johnson, “I Was Born to Be a Musician Too.”
24. This was also the period of the so-called British Invasion in which White male electric guitarists from Britain (e.g., Eric Clapton) and their aggressive rock music, inspired by the blues music of Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, and others, were introduced to the American mainstream.
25. Gaye Adegbalola, interview with the author, July 10, 2002.
26. Taj Mahal, interview with Brett Bonner and Scott Barretta, *Living Blues*, March/April 2000, 35.
27. Qtd. in Curtis Ross, “Coleman’s Not Singing the Blues,” *Tampa Tribune*, May 19, 2000, 20.
28. Bret Kofford, “Deborah Coleman: Blues with a Passion,” *Blues Revue* 33 (December 1997): 30.
29. Her only time “out of business” was a brief period in the mid-1960s, after Eddie Tigner of the Ink Spots, for whom she was working, had a stroke.
30. Although she did not want to wear the nurse’s cap, she acquiesced; however, she refused to wear nurse’s shoes.
31. Beverly “Guitar” Watkins, quoted in liner notes, *Back in Business*, Music Maker 91007-2, 2000, 5.