LADIES SING THE BLUES

From Bessie Smith in the 1920's to Koko Taylor today, women have been belting out the blues. On Wednesday, the Newport Jazz Festival will pay tribute to this still-vital matriarchal tradition.

By Ariel Swartley

It was a dream, a dream I never had before
I dreamed we all was dancing and put on a great big show.
—SIPPIE WALLACE
"Devil Dance Blues"

Chicago, Saturday night. The blues club we're heading for doesn't have a name, and its address on the city's desolate West Side — Fifth Avenue at Central Park — seems like some kind of grim joke. But when we locate the darkened intersection, the shabby bar glitters like a party boat in a sea of vacant lots. Inside, the accents are Southern-slow, the voices mostly men's, the whiskey ordered a pint at a time. A molasses-hued couple is dancing a lazy jitterbug while the snake-hipped vocalist rubs his bald brown head and swears he's got the "Eight Ball Blues."

If it weren't for the television and the Miller Lite beer, we might have been stepping back 40 years into one of the juke joints that followed the blues north from Mississippi through Memphis, Tenn., and on to "Sweet Home" Chicago as blacks from the rural South migrated northward to factory jobs and urban ghettos. Everything is peaceful tonight, but this is the sort of club about which performers like to tell war stories, the kind of place where the combination of liquor and what one singer calls "the low-down, backwoods blues that's based on hardship" can drive a man under the table or over it, waving a gun. We've come because it was in clubs like these that Koko Taylor, the reigning queen of Chicago blues, got her start.

Koko Taylor is a fierce-looking voice that's perfectly suited to the hard-driving, electrified blues that Chicago spawned after World War II. On stage, supported by her four-piece band, she delivers gritty versions of songs that would warm an assertiveness trainer's heart: "I'm a Woman (I'm a Ball of Fire)"; "Be What You Want to Be"; "You Can Have My Husband, But Please Don't Mess With My Man." Her vocal trademark is a sort of strangled scream, emblem of all frustration.

Offstage, Koko Taylor is, among other things, a grandmother with a sudden, childlike smile, gracious, soft-spoken, modest. "Me being about the only woman around today that's singing the blues," she says over a cup of coffee in the living room of her home on Chicago's South Side, "I guess you could call me the queen. I try to live up to the reputation."

She is not, however, coy about her abilities, nor about her attitude toward the brawling, preening, *machismo*-steeped tradition Chicago means by "blues" today. "I'm showing the men," she says quietly, "that they're not the only ones. . . . I can do just as good a job as they can at expressing the blues and singing the blues and holding an audience with the blues."

On Wednesday, Koko Taylor will join seven other women performers in proving the same thing to patrons of the annual Kool Newport Jazz Festival in Avery Fisher Hall. Opening with tributes to jazz-age divas like Bessie Smith and closing with Koko Taylor's electrified raunch, the program, entitled "Blues Is a Woman," will trace the blues' vigorous matriarchal line over more than 50 years. Bridging the generation gap, Nell Carter, the 29-year-old star of "Ain't Misbehavin'" and, more recently, "Black Broadway," will redeliver some of the earthy, wisecracking advice ("Trust No Man") that blueswomen were giving their sisters in the 1920's. And Sippie Wallace, at 81 the program's oldest participant, will offer her own, still-fresh remedies for heartache: "You Gotta Know How" and "A Man for Every Day in the Week."

It's one of the program's bittersweet ironies that, of all the performers, it's probably the aging Sippie Wallace who's best known to audiences under 30, for she has toured in recent years with Bonnie Raitt, the rock singer and guitarist. And yet it shouldn't be surprising that a young audience appreciates her — the blues, after all, is the root of both jazz and rock and roll. Indeed, Willie Mae (Big Mama) Thornton's astonishing growl at the beginning of "Hound Dog" inspired the young Elvis Presley to record his own version of the song. And Big Mama Thornton's moaning and squawking rhythm and blues will also be featured at Avery Fisher.

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There isn't a handy definition of the blues. People point to the ubiquitous 12-bar structure of the verses, in which a statement is made in the first line, repeated with slight variations or added emphasis in the second, and capped or commented on in the third and final line. "Good morning, blues, blues how do you do," runs a classic blues song. "Good morning, blues, I said, blues, how do you do? Well, I just come by to have a few words with you." Neither Bessie Smith's blues nor Koko Taylor's, however, fits exclusively into the 12-bar category.

Still, there *is* a sound that's unmistakably blue, a tonality that, to ears accustomed to European scales, hovers between major and minor, flatting notes in surprising places. The tonality seems ambivalent, poignant, bittersweet. As the blues scale rises, it almost sounds as if the singer were too weary to push the penultimate seventh note all the way up to pitch. On the down scale, the flatted note seems like a wry exaggeration, a jab at rules and expectations.

Of course, ambivalence, poignancy, weariness, exaggeration and thumbing one's nose at the white man's rules play a major part in blues lyrics as well. A singer named Melvin (Lil Son) Jackson once defined the blues as the feeling you get "from something that you think is wrong, or something that somebody did wrong to you . . . or to some of your own people . . . and the onliest way you have to tell it would be through a song." Over the years, blues singers have been telling it happy and sad, angry and sorrowful, plain and fancy, in 12 bars or 20.

Rosetta Reitz, who organized the Avery Fisher concert and wrote the narrative that the jazz singer Carmen McRae will deliver, is practically evangelical on the subject of the women who have sung the blues. "I believe there is a female sensibility in music," she says. "These women made an enormous contribution to blues and jazz. They made art out of their everyday experience." But their names, she continues, are often not as well known as those of the musicians who accompanied them. Perhaps this is partly due to what has often seemed to be a technological bias among jazz critics, mostly male, who *(Continued on Page 35)*

Ariel Swartley writes a column about popular music for Boston's Real Paper.

Bessie Smith's immense voice, bawdy double-entendres and hard-luck tales won her the title "Empress of the Blues."

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Barbara Wenberg

A young 81, Sippie Wallace (above) will perform at Wednesday's concert.

So will Big Mama Thornton (left), whose growl inspired Elvis Presley.

And Koko Taylor (below) will show off the strangled scream that is her trademark.

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The New York Times
Published: June 29, 1980

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prize a musician who has learned to manipulate an instrument more highly than a vocalist who just seems to open her mouth. "I'm trying," says Rosetta Reitz, who is at work on a book and has reissued several collections of women's blues on her own Rosetta Records, "to retrieve lost history and correct the imbalance."

So far as lost history goes, no one even knows precisely when the blues began. It was about the middle of the 19th century that people began "having the blues" — those familiar fits of gloomy despair — with any kind of written frequency. But the word did not officially enter the language as a musical term until 1912, when W.C. Handy, a Memphis composer and cornetist, published a tune entitled "The Memphis Blues."

Although Handy helped name the form, he didn't invent it. Handy himself wrote of having been "wakened" outside a Mississippi train station in 1903 by a man who kept singing that he was "going where the Southern cross the Dog" — a reference to a nearby railway junction. The man was accompanying himself on a guitar, producing a series of quavering notes by sliding a knife across the strings. (Some blues guitarists still use a variation of this technique, called "slide" or "bottleneck.") Gertrude (Ma) Rainey, an early star of the South's traveling minstrel shows, recalled hearing a girl in a small Missouri town in 1902 whose "strange lament" inspired her to include similar "blues" in her act. One thing seems clear: At the outset, the blues was not the exclusive property of either men or women.

What distinguished these early "blues" from the rise and fall of ghetto street-vendors' chants; from work songs in the fields and Sunday hymns in church, in both of which a leader's call was answered by a choral response; from the "blue" notes that were already evident in minstrel versions of popular ballads? Perhaps, for veteran performers like Handy and Ma Rainey, it was the dramatic possibilities of the elliptical, autobiographical, three-line form. The blues singer provided both the call and the response in the emerging 12-bar format. In the last line, singers could qualify their previous statements, add new information, poke fun at themselves or simply moan. The opportunities for emotional complexity and irony made the blues an ideal dramatic vehicle — as singers and instrumental soloists in jazz and rock have been rediscovering ever since.

Popular music was first recorded during this era, and it seems possible, too, that only the deepest feelings could transcend the tinny, mechanical contrivance of the early gramophone. The shock of hearing a disembodied voice confessing secret sorrows kept people buying blues records long after the novelty of the phonograph had worn off.

In the beginning, the ghostly, sly and seemingly naked voices that came from out of nowhere — except, perhaps, one's own thoughts — were women's. The first blues ever recorded — "That Thing Called Love" and "Crazy Blues" — were sung in 1920 by Mamie Smith, who pronounced "blue" as if she were Lauren Bacall puckering up to blow. Mention women's blues, however, and most people rightly think of Bessie Smith (no relation), whose moon face, immense voice and languorous phrasing suggested a refugee from some large, lost, elemental world. They called her the Empress, but actually she was born poor and orphaned early at the turn of the century in a Chattanooga, Tenn., ghetto. Bessie Smith's boisterous double-entendres ("Need a Little Sugar in My Bowl"), hard-luck tales of "aggravatin' women" and "mean mistreaters," and stark evocations of poverty and resignation ("Backwater Blues," "Poor Man's Blues") came to define the term "classic blues."

Since 1900, a kind of marriage had been taking place between African and European rhythms and harmonies. The ragtime concertos of Scott Joplin and Eubie Blake were one result; George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" was another; the classic blues was a third, in which floating verses out of rural Southern folklore were framed by artful overtures and codas, and choruses close to those once hollered by slaves working in the fields were made to mind music hall manners.

In recent years, Bessie Smith's recordings have been reissued in an impressively arranged and annotated set of five double volumes, and her titanic presence has been recalled on stage by Linda Hopkins's one-woman show, "Me and Bessie." (Linda Hopkins will also be performing in "Blues Is a Woman.")

Other huge-voiced women who first brought the blues to national prominence in the 1920's haven't fared as well. For instance, there was Georgia's Ma Rainey (to her face they called her madame), who had been stomping the tent-show circuit for almost a decade before Bessie Smith began. Known as the ugliest woman in show business, Ma Rainey was nevertheless adored throughout the South for her gaudy robes and her monkey face, for her necklaces made out of money and songs like her mordant "Southern Blues": "If your house catch on fire, ain't no water round/ Throw your trunk out the window, building burn on down."

"Blues is a good woman feeling bad," said Georgia Tom Dorsey, who eventually gave up his barrelhouse piano for the Lord and became the country's foremost composer of gospel music. A later and less pious generation would contend that blues is just as often a bad woman feeling good. That duality has been part of women's blues ever since Ma Rainey acted both the mammy and the whore on the tent-show stage. You can see it in the photos that preserve her smile: at once mischievous and maternal, tender and a little sad. Gertrude Rainey was known as Ma from the time she married in her teens. And she liked her extracurricular lovers young — pretty boys, more often chorus girls, whom she occasionally enjoyed by the gaggle.

It wasn't until the early 1970's that such proclivities became common knowledge among blues lovers. Chris Albertson's 1973 biography "Bessie" coincided with a turning point in attitudes about both blacks and women. Writing for a franker age than previous biographers, he could openly acknowledge Bessie Smith's and Ma Rainey's bisexuality, and report their salty language accurately. Albertson was also interested in tracing Bessie Smith's instinctive black pride, citing her preference for dark-skinned lovers during an era that thought light

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The New York Times
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was right, and her stubborn refusal to adapt herself to anybody's expectations. Earlier decades, believing only her sad songs and dismissing her lively ones as record producers' whims, had preferred to regard Bessie Smith as a victim — of men, gin, a fickle public and, finally, of Jim Crow laws that allowed her to bleed to death outside a whites-only hospital after an auto accident in 1937. Albertson debunked just about all of these myths and portrayed her as a person who was impossible to patronize. Those who tried to often found themselves decked by a blow from her ready fist.

To women beginning to feel their own consciousnesses rising, this was powerful stuff. If "poor Bessie" could turn out to be so tough, what hidden strength might other women have? Furthermore, what magnificent anthems and rallying cries had women been overlooking?

Songs such as Bessie Smith's "Young Woman's Blues" and Ida Cox's "Wild Women Don't Have the Blues" quickly became popular numbers with feminist singers and fans. It wasn't only what the songs were saying that made them so attractive, though when it came to sexuality and self-determination, they certainly seemed to say it all. Equally important was the irony — part understatement, part exaggeration, part double-entendre — that allows blues singers to disclaim responsibility for whatever it is you think they are implying. It's a handy device for any group that feels oppressed or isolated, and offers a means of communicating secretly and creating special bonds among those in the know. Thus blues are continually attracting new groups of partisans, from leftists in the 1940's to feminists today, who detect in the lyrics a code for their own concerns.

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Ask Koko Taylor if she heard Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey when she was growing up in Memphis, and she says, yes, she listened to some records but, more important, she was born with the blues. "I mean, the blues was my surroundings, my everyday walk of life." She grew up during the Depression. (Her exact age is a secret, but she's probably close to 50.) One of six children, she spent part of her childhood on a tenant farm in Bartlett, Tenn., northeast of Memphis. She sang in church, heard country-style blues on street corners and at picnics. She remembers her brother making his own guitar: "He just took some hay-baling wire and put it on some nails that he drove into the wall on the back of our house and played from that." Another brother made a harmonica from a corncob: "He put holes in where he could blow." She also remembers a record one brother brought home, called "Me and My Chauffeur Blues," by a tough-talking woman named Memphis Minnie who — as her contemporaries liked to say — could play guitar "just like a man."

"Back in those days," Koko Taylor recalls, "we didn't have electricity. We used kerosene to light up our houses, and we had this — what we called graphonolia — that we wound up with our hands. That's how we played our music. I can remember the whole family listening to that record, playing it over and over. I learned it so well, I knew every word by name."

A dozen years later, in the early 1950's, Koko Taylor followed Memphis Minnie's footsteps to Chicago — though she didn't think of it that way herself. By that time, the blues had changed. The instruments had become electrified in order to compete with and evoke the sound of the city. Koko Taylor's isn't a voice to be drowned out easily, even by a pair of heavily amplified guitars, but these were the Eisenhower and Betty Crocker years, when a woman's place was in the home and the voices on the radio were mostly men's. It took more than 10 years of waiting around, hanging out in clubs and sitting in with whoever would ask her before she was able to make a record. Longer still before she could afford her own band.

"There's not that many husbands would want a wife to travel and mix with outside people," Koko Taylor says. "I can kind of understand it. It's really not an easy field. Sometimes I stay up all night and all day just traveling, riding in that truck from one job to the next. And when we get there, it's time to go to work and I haven't had a decent meal — just sandwiches, whatever we can get best on the road. Then we finish work and we go checking into a hotel and we're sleeping out of a suitcase. There's one in the bedroom I haven't even unpacked yet.

"Plus, I'm away from my family. I wasn't traveling as much when my daughter was young. And I only had the one daughter, so therefore I didn't have to worry about a houseful of little babies behind. That meant a lot. And it seems like I got the right man for a husband — one that's in my corner all the way when it comes to my career."

Ironically, the majority of fans in Koko Taylor's corner these days are white. The singer has mixed feelings about this. "My daughter was born right here in Chicago," she says, "and when she was growing up, she didn't have to worry about if she could go to school tomorrow. She didn't have to worry about is she gonna eat. So this makes a big difference. She couldn't have the same feelings toward the

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blues like I do. Now the black people my age, especially the ones that come from the South (and 90 percent of them do), they're the ones that was really running from the blues. It's an everyday time clock to remind them of hard times. They're glad to go off into another bag like disco — makes them feel different inside.

"Right now, it seems that it's only the whites that want to hear the blues. To them, it's like something new. And so long as they appreciate me, I appreciate them. This is where my money's coming from, this is where my audience is coming from, this is where I get all of my strength right now. So I don't see why I should lose sleep about someone who's not interested in what I'm doing just because they're black."

Koko Taylor is touched and pleased by the fans in America and abroad who thank her for standing up for women. "That's pretty neat," she says. Inevitably, she tailors her material to this audience. Just as many blacks today shun blues songs that remind them of hard times in the rural South, women in the white university towns where Koko Taylor most often plays prefer not to hear too much talk about lovesick women at the mercy of men. Rosetta Reitz, who has selected the songs each artist will perform at Avery Fisher, says the thrust of "Blues Is a Woman" will be "upbeat, fun, sensual — not the victim variety of songs. We've had too much slave stuff."

Nevertheless, Koko Taylor says that her own favorite songs are slow and mournful, and Bessie Smith liked these, too. (Albertson quotes a Harlem jazz musician who swore he could go to the bathroom in the middle of one of Bessie Smith's verses and never miss a word because she dragged them out so long.) Koko Taylor's new single "Walking the Back Streets and Crying" is a slow, misery-laden love song that was released only after black radio stations in the Middle West and West — stations that hadn't played the blues for years — kept requesting it. But this doesn't mean she is going to drop the rousing "I'm a Woman" from her repertory. No way.

In a club near Evanston, Ill., where Koko Taylor regularly appears, there's a good-size floor for dancing right in front of the bandstand. And tonight a line of women — black and white, strangers to each other — stretches across it. The women are dancing, grinning and strutting and waving their arms, having a wonderful time.

"I'm an earthshaker," Koko Taylor rumbles. "I'm a woman. I can change old to new." Here, now, while we are dancing together to this woman's blues, it's all true. ■

The New York Times
Published: June 29, 1980