

# The Clerk's Black History Series

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## Memphis Minnie

(June 3, 1897 - August 6, 1973)

### "Queen of the Country Blues"



**Memphis Minnie** was born Lizzie Douglas on June 3, 1887, in Algiers, Louisiana. The oldest of 13 brothers and sisters. Minnie started playing banjo at the age of seven and got her first guitar at the age of 10. Her parents, Abe and Gertrude, nicknamed her "Kid". Around the same time, Minnie's family moved to Walls, Mississippi, just twenty miles south of Memphis, Tennessee - the city that would become her new namesake a few years later. At the age of 13, Minnie ran away to live on Beale Street, where she played her guitar on the sidewalk for cash.

From 1916 to 1920, Minnie joined the Ringling Brothers circus, traveling as a musician, singer, and playing guitar at house parties and dances with bluesman Willie Brown, Willie Moore, and others around Lake Cormorant and Walls. In her early 20s, Minnie returned to Beale Street, performing in clubs. There she met and married another blues artist, Joe McCoy. Minnie's powerful voice and unique guitar skills were unmatched at that time, and she was known to outshine most of the male artists around her.

In 1927, the Great Mississippi Flood killed hundreds of residents and flooded 26,000 square miles of the Mississippi Delta area. Minnie and Joe wrote and recorded "When The Levee Breaks" - a story about the fear of the devastation that followed the breaking levee. In 1930, Minnie and Joe moved to Chicago and were signed by the Columbia label. There she recorded one of her best-known songs, "Bumble Bee". The couple became known as *Kansas Joe and Memphis Minnie*, which is how they performed until their divorce in 1935. Due to the Great Depression, the duo's records sales were low and contributed to the split.

Although Minnie started her career playing an acoustic guitar, it was the electric guitar that sealed her place in history. Her powerful performances contributed to the transformation of the blues, to the Chicago style of blues, especially when she began playing in bands with other musicians. In the late 1930s, Minnie met and married another musician, Ernest "Little Joe Son" Lawlers. The couple made several popular songs, including "HooDoo Lady" and their song "Me and My Chauffeur Blues" - these showcased her transition to playing the electric guitar.

Minnie's public persona during this period marked a significant challenge to gender norms in blues performance. Her records covered many subjects including crime, voodoo, trains, health, and were openly sexual, delivering her signature confident, sassy voice. In all of her recordings, Minnie was musically in tuned with the lives of her fellow Black Americans. Her title of "Queen of the Country Blues" stems from her legacy of successfully recording music across four decades as well as being the lone female voice in a male-dominated country blues scene, paving the way for guitar playing women like Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Big Mama Thornton. Minnie retired in 1957 and returned to Memphis. She appeared on some radio shows and played a memorial concert in 1958. During the 1960s, Minnie saw her music revive with a renewed interest in blues, with the new wave of players and enthusiasts recognizing her role in laying crucial foundations of the genre. Throughout her 25-year career on the Vocalion, Decca, Bluebird, Okey, and Checker labels, Memphis Minnie recorded over 200 tracks.

In 1960, Minnie suffered a stroke which left her in a wheelchair. Her husband, Little Joe Son, died the next year. When she suffered a second stroke, magazines reported her plight and fans sent money to help. In 1971, the rock band, Led Zeppelin, reworked her song "When the Levee Breaks" into a bigger and bolder version - but the song was not released commercially as a single in the US or UK. Memphis Minnie died in a nursing home on August 6, 1973, and was buried with no marker in her hometown of Walls, Mississippi. In 1996, legendary singer-songwriter and Grammy Award winning Blues artist, Bonnie Raitt, paid for a memorial headstone for Minnie's burial site at the New Hope Church Cemetery.

