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# Woman With Guitar: Memphis Minnie's Blues



## Synopsis

Universally recognized as one of the greatest blues artists, Memphis Minnie (1897–1973) wrote and recorded hundreds of songs. Blues people as diverse as Muddy Waters, Johnny Shines, Big Mama Thornton, and Chuck Berry have acknowledged her as a major influence. At a time when most female vocalists sang Tin Pan Alley material, Minnie wrote her own lyrics and accompanied her singing with virtuoso guitar playing. Thanks to her merciless imagination and dark humor, her songs rank among the most vigorous and challenging popular poetry in any language. *Woman with Guitar* is the first full-length study of the life and work of this extraordinary free spirit, focusing on the lively interplay between Minnie's evolving artistry and the African American community in which she lived and worked. Drawing on folklore, psychoanalysis, critical theory, women's studies, and surrealism, the authors' explorations of Minnie's songs illuminate the poetics of popular culture as well as the largely hidden history of working-class women's self-emancipation. This revised and expanded edition includes a wealth of new biographical material, including photographs, record contracts, sheet music, and period advertisements, which further vivify this portrait of an African American musical legend. Complete, updated discography included.

"*Woman with Guitar* is a fascinating, thorough and extremely valuable biography of one of American musical history's most vibrant and pioneering artists. As the first woman singer/songwriter/ guitarist to ever reach stardom, the story of her life in music, on and off the stage, during one of the most important and formative periods of the origins of popular music, is an indelible, crucial window into that history."

—Bonnie Raitt

"*Woman with Guitar* has been, since it was first published in 1992 and now with this new revised and extended edition, still the only real definitive biography of Memphis Minnie, the most important female singer, songwriter and guitarist in the history of Delta blues."

—Lucinda Williams

"As a most ardent and devoted lifelong fan of Memphis Minnie and her music, I avidly devoured the original *Woman with Guitar* when it first came out in 1992. Now I am excited to be reading this new edition, and so grateful for its additional rare photos and carefully researched details, which shed even more light on this seminal, iconic, almost mythical musical pioneer, who was way ahead of her time, and whose soulful music and life so deeply inspired and influenced so many! A must read — whether you are already a Memphis Minnie fan, or just discovering her for the first time!"

—Maria Muldaur

"An excellent book."

—Bill Wyman

"*Woman with Guitar* is not simply a carefully researched biography of Memphis Minnie, compiled from the memories of her relatives, friends, and fellow performers; it is a vivid portrait of a talented singer and guitarist . . . The authors have added a new dimension to blues scholarship."

—Paul Oliver, author of *Blues Off the Record*

"*Woman with Guitar* is a delight. The

book is both thorough and brilliant, a rare combination these days. . . . A fanatic interest in Minnie underpins and energizes this wonderful biography."#151;David Roediger, author of *The Wages of Whiteness*Paul Garon is a co-founder of *Living Blues* magazine and author of *The Devil's Son-in-Law and Blues and the Poetic Spirit*. Beth Garon is a painter and collagist. The Garons operate a rare-book business in Chicago, Illinois, and have been associated with the US surrealist movement for many years.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"One of the exciting things about the publication of this new edition is that it serves as a kind of touchstone for the current state of blues research and scholarship. And what becomes quickly apparent is that the digital has opened many new doors into the past, so that the Garons have been able to expand and enhance their portrait of Memphis Minnie through the inclusion of newly unearthed material â | [adding] a multifaceted and complex dimension to the reader's understanding of who this blues woman with guitar was and what her life and legacy have come to and will continue to represent"â "Robert H. Cataliotti"Masterly ... I doubt that this work could be improved upon and is heartily recommended."#151;Howard Rye, *Blues & Rhythm*â œ[T]he strength and character of this remarkable woman in the world of Blues musicians comes through. Memphis Minnie is an important example of an African American female musician who challenged contemporary gender roles in racially segregated American society."â "The Journal of African American History"lâ™d worried that the redoubtable, unsinkable Memphis Minnie might fall apart

under the flaying of the pages, as artists suffer through biographies too-literal, too-scholarly, or simply without enough imagination. I needn't have. The Garons' book, revised and expanded from an earlier edition, presents the artist in such a tantalizing manner than even if you haven't heard her sides, you'll run to your musical platform of choice, to sooth your ache &#133; She set standards for guitar playing, singing and phrasing still hard to beat; Led Zeppelin paid her the ultimate compliment of a ripoff. She lives in our ears, and on the page&#151;thank the Garons for that.&#150;&#150;Andrew Hamlin, OffBeat Magazine"As the Garons show again and again, Minnie's earthy appeal was broad. Her playing was, as described by poet Langston Hughes, like 'heartbeats mixed with iron and steel.&#133; Woman with Guitar follows Minnie from rural Mississippi to Beale Street to Chicago and back to Memphis again, documenting the groundbreaking highs and the heartbreaking lows. It also digs deep into her discography, running down threads of protest and cultural commentary.&#151;Chris Davis, Memphis Flyer"The idea behind any biography is to bring the subject into brighter light, illuminating their character, their strengths and faults as well as their impact on the world around them. The Garons and their contributors have certainly fulfilled that goal. This updated volume celebrates the legacy of the person many claim was the first lady of the blues. Blues fans should relish this opportunity to discover more about Memphis Minnie, a pivotal figure in blues history.&#150;&#150;Mark Thompson, Blues Blast Magazine"Woman with Guitar showcases an intrepid performer who defied the odds, lived life on her own terms, and refused to accept the status quo, especially when it came to restrictions on women's agency. She refused to be submissive, meek, or quiet and was unafraid to make demands or get angry. Beth and Paul Garon celebrate Minnie's bold spirit and are to be credited for introducing her to a whole new generation of potential fans who will likely now hear her on YouTube. Furthermore, their work has raised a slew of questions about American Blues women, opening the door to additional research and exploration."&#151;Eleanor J. Bader, Review Fix"The Garons' surrealist portrait of Minnie is a unique work of scholarship and an essential text toward understanding not only Minnie's world and work, but the blues itself. Quoting her lyrics and others in blues tradition, the authors consistently and convincingly deliver the idea that a blues narrative is often less critical to interpretation than its lines and metaphors &#133; An offering to anyone interested in better understanding the blues and aiding in its survival, the Garons' work has certainly made a difference in my own explorations, listenings and writings on blues."&#151;Denise Sullivan, Blurt Magazine"If you buy only one book on the blues this year&#150;&#150;this should be the one!"&#150;&#150;Frank Scott, Roots & Rhythm"Paul and Beth Garon write like fans, calling Memphis Minnie 'one of the most influential blues singers ever to record.' It sounds like the

case-building biographers are wont to do; but they back their statement with a who's who of blues performers who acknowledge their point. The new edition of *Woman with a Guitar* fills in facts but the big picture is unchanged. Minnie was a rarity in the 1930s-1950s, a guitar-playing blueswoman whose original songs entered the repertoire of many performers. A touch of blues purist snobbery is indicated by the lack of mention of the best known Memphis Minnie cover, Led Zeppelin's 'When the Levee Breaks.'

David Lührssen, *Express Milwaukee* "One of the exciting things about the publication of this new edition is that it serves as a kind of touchstone for the current state of blues research and scholarship. And what becomes quickly apparent is that the digital has opened many new doors into the past, so that the Garons have been able to expand and enhance their portrait of Memphis Minnie through the inclusion of newly unearthed material | [adding] a multifaceted and complex dimension to the reader's understanding of who this blues woman with guitar was and what her life and legacy have come to and will continue to represent."

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**Paul Garon:** Paul Garon has written about the blues for nearly fifty years. A co-founder of Living Blues, he is also the author of *The Devil's Son-in-Law: The Story of Peetie Wheatstraw and His Songs*, *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* and *What's the Use of Walking if a Freight Train's Going Your Way*, as well as a small collection of prose poems, *Rana Mozelle*.

**Beth Garon:** Beth Garon is a collagist and painter, and *Woman with Guitar* is her first book. She and her husband and co-author, Paul have both been active participants in the Surrealist movement in the US for many years. The Garons operate Beasley Books, a used and rare book business in Chicago.

these ethno music writers are trying to turn the blues into a science project.

So good that this great history has been preserved.., just so important.

I would have given this a four but I had the same reaction as one of the other reviewers to the attempts to critique Minnie's music by "class, race and gender" as tedious, boring and in many cases just a plain diatribe against white males (though they slam black ones too) and an attempt to push their political agenda. I guess it's a four for the sections dealing with Minnie's life and the discography and other factual information and a two for the lecture on the evils of racist America so I'll split it at three. I would have liked more about Minnie as a musician. Who and how did she learn guitar for instance, maybe with tabbed examples.

How fine and appropriate that City Lights, the storied publisher of great hip poets, should bring out this new and expanded edition of the biography of this extraordinary blues singer. An exceptional guitarist who wrote much of her own material, Memphis Minnie created a unique and entrancing body of work -- some 184 recorded sides -- that stand up with dramatic intensity as well today as when they were released between 1929 and the early 1950s. Individually, Minnie's songs exhibit unusual internal unity and overall they exhibit a wide range of themes. Singing about her own life brought out the best in her ("In My Girlish Days"); she was never so deceptive as when ostensibly light-hearted ("Frisco Train") and never less than frank when she opened her mouth to sing. Her lyrics ranged from raucous to wise; she sang harshly about venereal disease ("Kissing in the Dark") and tenderly about race horses ("Frankie Jean") and, for all that, she did not have a sentimental bone in her body or a cheap lyric in her repertoire. Her commitment as a singer frequently matches that of Bessie Smith and she stands, in short, with any of the great blues musicians. All that said, she could not have found better biographers than Paul Garon, a pioneering and highly regarded blues scholar, and Beth Garon. Together they provide both the most detailed possible account of Minnie's life together with a brilliant exposition of her major themes. This new edition includes fresh material, more invaluable images, and an excellent, informative new foreword by founder of Living Blues and Rooster Blues Records, Jim O'Neal.

talk about an artist who never gets mentioned hardly if ever? she was bad and the truth on Guitar and vocals. this book is a needed as it reflects on Race, Sex and Class and especially during a even rougher time period. and yet talent never gets held back and this woman was the truth musically and you learn so much more and get real good insight, very well written indeed.

The first part of this book is a useful sketch of Memphis Minnie's life. It sets out the basics of her life

history, and we gain an appreciation for her skill as a blues singer, guitarist, and songwriter. The second part of the book is mainly useful for the content of the lyrics and the discography. The authors' interpretive commentary on various blues lyrics often leaves a bit to be desired. At times, the interpretation of the symbolic expression yields intriguing ways to think about the blues tunes. There also are unifying threads that pull together some of the themes. The major weaknesses, however, relate to the ways that the authors read too much into the lyrics rather than elucidating compelling conclusions by reading meaning from the lyrics. The writing also foregrounds some ideas from literary theory in a style that is clunky and pedantic. The analysis, thus, often distracts rather than embellishes one's appreciation of the poetic skill and clever humor in Memphis Minnie's tunes. The commentary also sometimes has a tone that comes off as both haughty and naive at the same time. For example, the Garons make unsubstantiated claims that they can't support. A glaring one is the way they chastize folklorists for assuming that there is only one meaning to a text. This argument doesn't hold up, as for at least 4 decades folklorists have been looking at meaning as an emergent quality that varies with performance; furthermore, folklorists were writing about polysemy long before anyone even mentioned the term "postmodernism." Much of the analysis suffers from this mixture of seemingly bold claims that really lack good evidence for their support. Nevertheless, the book is an introduction to a remarkable musician, and the discography is a good one.

This is a very interesting and well researched biography of Memphis Minnie. Along with her biography and history, it contains several appendices which give useful information about her advertised performances, her recording history (including labels, session dates, backup musicians etc.). The biographical and historical information in the book is very worthwhile. Unfortunately the book contains a lengthy section which purports to critique Memphis Minnie's music and lyrics through "class, race and gender" analysis. I got through about four pages of that section before boredom and disinterest set in and I gave up. I skimmed the rest of that section but it didn't get any better. So I skipped over that portion of the book and went to the appendices, which have some very useful historical information. Overall, the history and biography part of the book is very good. The section devoted to "class, race and gender" analysis of Memphis Minnie's songs is, for me at least, a very effective sleep inducer.

There are so many poorly researched segments in this biography, that to list them would be too lengthy. Half of the book is biography, the other half academic deconstructions of Minnie's songs. The first 30 years of her life is nearly absent; questions remain unanswered even after that. The one



good thing about this work, is that there's all sorts of room left for someone to write a definitive--or even near definitive--biography of this great blues singer and song writer.

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