

13 Black Women: Race, Gender, Genre, and the Electric Guitar

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Historical Overview: Black Women in the United States

Black women occupy a distinctive social location in the United States. They are Black, and they are women. As such, they embody two simultaneous identities that are dynamic but also historically marginalized. Since enslavement in the United States, Black women have experienced trenchant limitations on their abilities to define and represent themselves, improve their life chances, and freely engage in self-expression. Prevailing constructs of femininity framed as piety and purity were reserved for the protection and security of only white women. By contrast, Black women were subjected to stereotypes created by the dominant white society that intentionally distorted them as desexualized Mammies and oversexualized Jezebels, not worthy of protection or consideration of any kind.¹ In spite of ongoing legacies of racism, racial segregation, and sexism, Black women nonetheless found ways to propel themselves into a vibrant resistance seeking liberated and self-generated representations. To that end, entertainment became a significant field for Black women's labor through artistic expression. An ability to sing, in particular, emerged as a viable way to broaden the landscape of lives that would otherwise have been limited to low-paying, backbreaking jobs as sharecroppers or as domestic servants for whites—positions proscribed as the domain of Black women in late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century America.²

Within this crucible, the singing Black woman in the United States forged a storied representational legacy. She is *seen* and reigns supreme—dominating the American cultural landscape with indisputable critical and popular success across decades in genres such as blues, jazz, R&B, soul, gospel, and pop. Everyone understands that this is Black women's *place* in music.

But let a singing Black woman strap an electric guitar onto her body, and she becomes *displaced*, a fact that is particularly appalling because Black women have a long legacy playing the electric guitar across genres and eras since Memphis Minnie and Sister Rosetta Tharpe ostensibly became the first two Black women to pick up the instrument in the

1930s and 1940s. Documenting the existence of this overlooked history reveals the perils and promises of Black women's long engagement with the instrument. It also reveals how Black women electric guitarists are uniquely situated at a complex, contradictory intersection of race, gender, and genre with regard to the electric guitar. The following offers a concise survey of select Black women electric guitarists and their achievements across the genres of rock and roll, blues, and gospel, taking an intersectional approach to understanding the arc of their careers, the hurdles they faced, and the need to insert them into existing histories of popular music.

Black Women and the Electric Guitar: A Legacy Hidden in Plain Sight

The electric guitar is a culturally iconic instrument in the United States, crucial to evolutions and innovations in blues and rock music especially. Playing electric guitar is typically represented as a masculine activity in popular culture and in much literature, both popular and academic. In this music-making meta-narrative, men are the great guitar players, elevated as the primary creators and innovators of blues (in particular, Black men) and of rock (in particular, white men), with the electric guitar serving as a signifier of ecstatic male sexuality and virility.³

Lizzie "Memphis Minnie" Douglas

Muddy Waters gained sustained national stardom by playing urban blues on an electric guitar in Chicago, Illinois. But years before Waters, according to her biographers Paul and Beth Garon, Lizzie "Memphis Minnie" Douglas played in Chicago as the sole Black woman electric guitarist in blues music. Her career in the first half of the twentieth century oversaw and kept pace with blues as it shifted from a more rudimentary, rural-inspired sound with the acoustic guitar to one appreciably infused by the technology of the electric guitar in urban settings such as Chicago, where many southern African Americans like Memphis Minnie and Muddy Waters migrated.⁴ One of the very first Black women singer-guitarists to record, Memphis Minnie garnered a measure of regional and national popularity; she was one of the first artists to switch from acoustic to electric, and helped shape and popularize a more modernized blues.⁵ She was known for her brash personality and hard-driving performances with the electric guitar, for her love of stylish clothing and hard drinking. Memphis Minnie influenced artists such as Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, The Rolling Stones, and Led Zeppelin, which helped secure their places in blues and rock histories, but not her own.

“Sister” Rosetta Tharpe

With the electric guitar strapped across her body in the 1940s, Sister Rosetta Tharpe gave stellar performances that made her into a gospel star and a national celebrity. Her ebullient style of playing became a major impetus for gospel’s commercial crossover from Black churches to white performance spaces. Flamboyant, loud, and riveting with the electric guitar, Tharpe influenced musicians such as Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Johnny Cash.⁶ It is only since the publication of *Shout, Sister, Shout! The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe* (2007), that Tharpe has been more widely acknowledged and, more importantly, credited as a rock pioneer. Gayle Wald’s definitive biography helped lead to the debut of a British-produced documentary, *Sister Rosetta Tharpe: The Godmother of Rock & Roll* (2013), which aired on PBS in the United States. In 2018, Tharpe was posthumously inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame as an “Early Influence.”

Memphis Minnie and Sister Rosetta Tharpe are foundational figures in the history of Black women electric guitarists.⁷ Their pioneering presence and prolific work blazed a collective trail followed by artists such as Mary Lynn Deloatch (b. 1923), Peggy “Lady Bo” Jones Malone (1940–2015), and Barbara Lynn Ozen (b. 1942), whose subsequent careers help prove the trail’s existence.

Unbroken Succession

In the late 1940s to 1950s, Mary Lynn Deloatch was a moderately successful blues and gospel recording artist based in the South. By the 1960s, she was working as a local radio host with her own show while traveling as an evangelist, visiting churches with her “talking [electric] guitar”⁸ throughout the Tidewater area of Virginia and other southern and midwestern cities. One 1965 *New Journal and Guide* advertisement touted her as an upcoming guest speaker at a local church, and it featured Deloatch smiling in a photograph wearing a choir robe and an electric guitar.⁹ Though not a professional musician, a 1945 *Pittsburgh Courier* “Personalities” column profile of “Mrs. Margaret McDaniels” noted that, aside from a life centered on membership in civic organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), she was also a popular local performer, a coloratura soprano, and “she plays the electric guitar.”¹⁰ After winning a music competition sponsored by the *Afro-American* newspaper in Baltimore, Maryland, Beatrice Booze (c.1913–?), better known as “Wee Bea Booze,” earned moderate success with a hit song, “See See Rider.” She sang and played a resonator guitar and was variously described in newspaper articles as the “guitar strumming lassie”¹¹ or the “little girl with the voice and the guitar.”¹² Booze toured with Louis Armstrong’s orchestra,

performed and sang with Andy Kirk and Sammy Price, and worked a circuit of clubs throughout the Midwest and the North. With a career that began in the 1930s, Nora Lee King (1909–1995) was a singer-songwriter in jazz, playing an electric guitar and recording or performing with artists such as Dizzy Gillespie and Mary Lou Williams. She later joined The Lucienaries, the rhythm quartet of guitarist Lawrence Lucie (whom she married).

Sylvia Vanderpool Robinson of the singing duo Mickey and Sylvia also played electric guitar. Their Bo Diddley cover of “Love Is Strange” reached #1 on Billboard’s R&B chart in 1956. In 1961, she arranged and played on Ike & Tina Turner’s Grammy-nominated hit song, “It’s Gonna Work Out Fine.” In 1968, Robinson became one of the few female record producers when she and her then-husband formed the All Platinum Record Co. She went on to her own solo career in the 1970s and became a pioneer in hip hop when she cofounded Sugar Hill Records, which released “Rapper’s Delight” by The Sugarhill Gang in 1979, a now iconic song she cowrote and produced, credited with ushering rap music into the American mainstream when it became a Top 40 hit in the United States. In 2022, Robinson was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in honor of that success.

In the late 1950s to early 1960s, Peggy “Lady Bo” Jones Malone likely became the first Black woman electric guitarist in rock and roll when she began playing with Bo Diddley (Diddley titled his 1966 album *The Originator* and was sufficiently hailed as a genre founder in his lifetime) as part of his band. As “Lady Bo,” she recorded and toured with him throughout the United States. Later, Bo Diddley hired another Black woman electric guitarist, Norma-Jean “The Duchess” Wofford (c.1942–2005), after Lady Bo stepped down for family reasons (though she returned a few years later). The Duchess recorded with Diddley and performed with him, including on *The Big TNT Show* (1965), where she sang and played electric guitar in heels and a slinky, form-fitting dress.

Just nineteen years old at the time, Barbara Lynn, a left-handed electric guitarist from Beaumont, Texas, earned a #1 R&B hit and a Top 10 pop hit (she scored to #8) as a solo artist with “You’ll Lose A Good Thing” in 1962. While her songs never charted that high again, “You’ll Lose a Good Thing” became a mainstay in her repertoire, enabling her to maintain a viable public presence through such appearances as her 1966 performance of the song on *The !!!! Beat* in an outfit stylistically reminiscent of The Duchess.

Documenting Black women’s sustained presence playing the electric guitar was first initiated by ethnomusicologist Maria V. Johnson; and even an abbreviated delineation, like the one above, shows the depths of Black women’s engagement with the guitar (amplified and electric). It also

reveals how Black women electric guitarists *differentially* inhabited and negotiated a complex, contradictory space based on an array of factors around race, gender, era, and the genres they played.

For example, Deloatch, early in her career, publicly contended with secular-sacred crossover concerns while playing electric guitar, zigzagging between blues and gospel. When recording gospel songs like “I’ll Ride On A Cloud With My Lord,” she used the name Mary Deloatch.¹³ When recording blues like “I Got What My Daddy Likes,” she was known as Marylyn Scott.¹⁴ By the 1960s, she seems to have finally made her choice: gospel. Lady Bo, who continued to play off and on into the twenty-first century, knew she was not able to experience the kind of career she felt she should have had, and was not able to experience being honored for her pioneering contributions. As she stated in a 2000 interview:

I emerged at a time when there were no other female lead guitarists and spent years as the lesser known band member in the career of Bo Diddley. It seems you were ignored if you played an instrument. Record labels, promoters, forgot your name like you didn’t exist. Most photographers and newspapers edited the girl guitar player (me) out of photos that went to press like it wasn’t important.¹⁵

When asked by the interviewer how she would like to be remembered, Lady Bo said, “LADY BO, FIRST LADY OF R&B[,] BLUES AND QUEEN MOTHER OF GUITAR, AN AMERICAN LEGEND!”¹⁶

Eventually, The Duchess left Bo Diddley’s band to return home to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to get married. Despite her own pioneering turn in rock and roll, she too has been overlooked and died with less acknowledgment of her skills and contribution than Lady Bo, who was able to engender greater recognition later in life.

While Barbara Lynn released three albums throughout the 1960s and one single in the 1970s, she did not release another album until the 1980s on a Japanese label. However, she was able to enjoy having more stratospherically successful artists such as Aretha Franklin and The Rolling Stones performing covers of her songs. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Barbara Lynn returned a third time to making albums and touring. Given rap music’s worldwide acclaim, Sylvia Vanderpool Robinson is better known in music history as a pioneer hip hop mogul, while her days as a guitarist are all but forgotten.

1970s–2000s: Legacy Continued

Since the 1960s, through the latter end of the twentieth century, Black women have continued to play electric guitar. Their careers serve as cairns marking the ongoing use of Memphis Minnie and Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s

trail, revealing the jagged contours of its rugged terrain, building multi-scalar careers as professional and semi-professional musicians with varying success.

In 1978, Hazel Payne (b. ?) regally posed with her electric guitar on the cover of her band's self-titled debut album, *A Taste of Honey*. A Taste of Honey are best known for their debut #1 crossover disco hit "Boogie Oogie Oogie" (1978) and their 1980 popular English-language cover of the 1961 Japanese hit "Sukiyaki." Payne left A Taste of Honey not long afterward to pursue acting. In the 2000s, she was involved in a variety of 1970s disco-era nostalgia musicals, documentaries, and concerts.

In the 1980s, Cheryl Cooley (b. 1970) was lead guitarist and a cofounder of the all-female, predominately Black funk and R&B band Klymaxx. Klymaxx earned a Top 10 hit in 1985 with "I Miss You" and continued to be a fan favorite, charting a few more times on the Top 10 and Top 20 R&B and Dance Billboard charts. Today, Cooley leads a controversially reconstituted touring lineup of "Klymaxx, featuring Cheryl Cooley," performing throughout the United States. Suzanne Thomas (1955–2015) grew up listening to Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Barbara Lynn. Thomas indulged her love of rock by playing in two hard rock bands, PMS The Band and Crank, in the late 1980s to 1990s. In the 1990s, she played electric guitar and bass in a reconstituted lineup of A Taste of Honey (in the position Hazel Payne held). She later developed a passion for blues, leading her own band, Suzanne Thomas and the Blues Church, and becoming a music educator.

Blues guitarist Jessie Mae Hemphill (1933–2006), part of a well-respected lineage of early twentieth-century multi-instrumentalists in Mississippi, released her first album *She-Wolf* on a French-label album in 1981. With help from folklorists such as George Mitchell and David Evans, Hemphill gained recognition largely within the blues world, performing and touring until the early 1990s.

Kat Dyson (b. ?) constructed a career playing electric guitar as a member of Prince's New Power Generation in the 1990s, performing in television house bands and on stage with musicians across multiple genres, releasing her own independent music. From 1993 to 2015, Felicia Collins (b. 1964) played electric guitar and sang in the CBS Orchestra, David Letterman's house band, who also served as the house band at Rock & Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremonies. Before that, Collins launched her career performing with the Thompson Twins at Live Aid in 1985, recorded and toured with Al Jarreau, and toured with Cyndi Lauper. Over the broader course of her career, Collins formed rock/funk bands and released her own music.

Deborah Coleman (1956–2018) was inspired by Jimi Hendrix to play electric guitar. In her 20s, Coleman played in an all-female rock band (MOXXIE) and an R&B band (Mis’Behaven). In 1993, she won an amateur blues festival contest that led to a more expansive career with a national presence in music. Coleman played a circuit of blues festivals, performed all over the world, and released numerous albums on independent American and European record labels. She was enthusiastically received in blues circles and nominated nine times for a Blues Music Award. Hailed for her skills and participation in blues, she was also sometimes criticized for the rock elements that showed up in them.¹⁷

In 2005, Danielia Cotton Roberts (b. 1967) posed in all black with her electric guitar for the cover of her debut album, *Small White Town*, a description of the New Jersey town where she was raised. She also opened for Living Colour, a rock band considered “pioneer” due to the popular success they achieved as Black men in the genre in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Interviewed in 2008 by *NPR* about her album *Rare Child*, Cotton said rock appealed to her because she was a “little black kid in a white town and I was angry. And that music was a place I could put that aggression.”¹⁸ *Rare Child* was positively reviewed in *The New York Times* for crafting a southern rock sound the journalist likened to white male musicians and “the rockier side of Bonnie Raitt.”¹⁹

Born and raised in Denver, Colorado, Bibi McGill (b. 1964) became the most visible Black woman electric guitarist as Beyoncé’s musical director and lead guitarist for her all-women touring band, The Suga Mamas, from 2006 to 2014. In 2020, she told *Guitar World* that noted metal guitarist Randy Rhoads “was really the only guitar player I loved.”²⁰ Before Beyoncé, McGill had performed with Pink early in her career, and toured with a Chilean rock band.

A Stony Road to Trod

Blues Music

Taken together, the above shows the heterogeneity of Black women’s careers and lives with the electric guitar. It also, however, reveals their ongoing encounters negotiating broader issues of race, gender, and genre very specific to Black women musicians.

Historically, blues scholars and writers (largely male and white) structured and defined blues music as the predominant purview of Black male mastery. Black men are heralded as the innovators and critical players, and Black women’s contributions are contextualized through the intentional feminized genre distinction of “classic blues,” also known as “women’s

blues,” considered the polished, urbanized, vaudeville-inspired style performed by Black women singers of the 1920s, making it less authentic.²¹

The success of women’s blues helped lead to the recording of solo Black male players on the acoustic guitar in the mid 1920s. This “country blues,” sometimes referred to as “folk blues” and “downhome blues,” has come to be constructed as the more authentic blues because it was gruff and inelegant, associated with the music of decidedly unpolished rural southern Blacks. It is also recognized as the critical precursor of urban blues, the electric guitar-based blues of many Black male country blues players who created a sound reflective of their adjustment to the intensity of city life upon migration out of the South to cities such as Chicago. In this blues discourse, the fact of Black women having played both acoustic and electric guitar is missing, with the exception of Memphis Minnie, who is often constructed as an anomaly.

As a genre, blues continues to privilege the musicianship of Black men as vocalists and instrumentalists. While Black women are particularly beloved in the genre as vocalists within the stereotypical trope of the hard-living blues shouter, Black women electric guitarists have carved out a space of representation for themselves, albeit while being perceived as outliers or spectacles.

Beverly “Guitar” Watkins (1939–2019), an Atlanta-based independent blues guitarist, was keenly aware of this state of play even as she benefited from being perceived as a spectacle: the electric-guitar-playing granny of authentic downhome southern blues. A working-class woman who occasionally supported herself as a cleaner throughout her life, Watkins experienced a revived interest in her blues and gospel guitar playing operating under the auspices of Music Maker Foundation, a southern arts organization dedicated to providing relief to elder American roots musicians in need both financially and creatively, beginning in the late 1990s. Over nearly thirty years, Music Maker Foundation has enabled mainly older Black blues musicians to sing and play before wide-ranging audiences of fans in the United States and overseas, many of whom are white, quite ardent, and knowledgeable. It is hard to imagine that individuals whose careers never launched or were struggling could experience being treated, not unironically, like rock stars. Decades earlier, Watkins played guitar in Dr. Feelgood and the Interns, Piano Red’s band, in which she dressed up as a nurse wearing a white, short-sleeved, knee-length uniform, complete with a nurse’s cap tucked on top of her coiffed hair. In the 1960s, they shared the bill with artists such as B.B. King, James Brown and The Famous Flames, Ray Charles, and Little Anthony and the Imperials.²² They had a pop hit with “Dr. Feelgood” on Okeh Records (1961).

With Music Maker Foundation, Watkins experienced being treated well. She was able to record her first solo album at the age of sixty and enjoy being a professional musician traveling and performing, making money to sustain herself while gaining a measure of renown. Still, within this positive sphere, she navigated the commodification and cultural politics of blues as largely controlled by white blues fans, promoters, and musicians who organize national and international festivals and tours, and release and rerelease blues records. Watkins was keenly aware of how her age intersected with her marketability. As an older southern Black woman, she was considered authentic within a blues milieu that heralded her for that identity and hamstrung her within stereotypical tropes of southern Blackness and blues. Watkins was irritated, in particular, with what she felt were presumptions that she “look tore down,” like an old blues music country bumpkin fresh from a juke joint in southern backwoods.²³ She expressed dislike with the way she was styled for at least one of her later photo shoots, where she did not feel the imagery matched her own understanding of herself as a vigorous and ambitious “Black sister.” She was not interested in being elderly or being treated as frail or uneducated—responses she felt she sometimes experienced in her career. She took great pride in displaying energetic exhibitionism on her instrument. Watkins was also bothered by the way some of her Black male peers seemed to readily play into stereotypes for their predominately white blues audiences. She found it unprofessional, unnecessary, and demeaning.

Though decades younger than Watkins, Detroit-born BB Queen (b. 1964), an independent artist who has been performing as a musician in public since she was a little girl, has also had to navigate blues stereotypes associated with being a Black woman.

I have shown up to so many places, and they say, “Hey, how you doin’? Now when is Queen gonna get here?” But I am. I am. I’m BB Queen. You know, and then they’ll go, “Oh! Aah!,” and I know what they expected . . . it’s just the stereotype of a Black woman in blues is this huge, Black, uneducated, greasy face, talkin’ loud, spittin’, drinking whiskey . . . I play the blues, it doesn’t mean I got the blues.²⁴

Blues stereotypes that specifically impact Black women are offensive to their professionalism, presentation, and performance as artists, especially skilled on the electric guitar, an instrument that is often a particular point of pride for them, given its hegemonic sociocultural position in American popular music.

In addition to dealing with blues music stereotypes around presentation and instrumentation, they also jockey for attention with their fellow white women electric guitarists, who have greater visibility. Appalled at

a journalist describing one Black woman electric guitarist as an “African-American Bonnie Raitt,” Maria V. Johnson once begged the question: “How is it that a White woman becomes the measuring stick for female guitarists within a Black cultural form?”²⁵ For certain, white women electric guitarists in blues like Raitt (who helped pay for a headstone marker for Memphis Minnie in 1997) and Susan Tedeschi, representatively, have received and achieved more mainstream, widespread fortune and fame, unlike Black women electric guitarists such as Deborah Coleman, Beverly “Guitar” Watkins, BB Queen, or Suzanne Thomas—a point that both Raitt and Tedeschi would readily affirm. Not surprisingly, then, while genre conventions of the marketplace differentially value all artists based on factors such as gender and race, and not musicianship alone, Black women are placed in the position of being particular sonic and visual interlopers in relation to the instrument.

Rock Music

In *Black Diamond Queens: African American Women and Rock and Roll* (2020), cultural anthropologist Maureen Mahon largely details Black American women’s long-overlooked participation and contribution to rock music as solo artists, band members, and background singers from the 1950s to the 1980s. This recuperative work necessarily requires reiterating how “the organizational structure and everyday decision-making practice of the US recording industry . . . did not permit African American women the same degree of genre mobility and access as white men”²⁶ to help explain why Black women have been left out of rock’s legacy and analyze rock’s ongoing mystification of Black women in the genre.

Suzanne Thomas said she experienced this with record labels who would express interest in her hard rock bands until they would inevitably express cluelessness as to how they would be marketed. “They really didn’t know what to do with us,” she recalled:

They didn’t know what to do with a Black male band, so now what are you going to do with an all-Black female band that plays rock? . . . We were hard rock, but we still had that groove . . . It was very frustrating . . . we were no different from Van Halen and all that, but we were just Black and female.²⁷

Rock, then, is especially treacherous for Black women electric guitarists. Though they contributed to its formation, innovation, and propagation, enjoy listening to the music and playing it, and as such can lay claim to a justified place like anyone else, they are gatekept out of it. Sister Rosetta Tharpe may now be accepted as a foremother of rock and roll, but some of her Black contemporary daughters must still struggle to demonstrate proof of worth.

While Thomas struggled to be signed in the 1980s and 1990s, numerous white women electric guitarists such as Nancy Wilson, Joan Jett, Lita Ford, Jennifer Batten, Liz Phair, and Courtney Love, to name a few, experienced and enjoyed greater acceptance, visibility, and recognition within different genres of rock. These genres remained largely closed to Black women electric guitarists even as some, like indie rock, were being celebrated for their preponderance of talented women electric guitarists in the 1990s. Not surprisingly, white women electric guitarists are also more visibly historicized as singer-instrumentalists in rock, country, folk, alternative, and indie rock.²⁸ In her book *What Are You Doing Here? A Black Woman's Life and Liberation in Heavy Metal* (2012), cultural critic and ethnomusicologist Laina Dawes noted that “Female black guitarists have life even harder. The image of a black male guitarist like Jimi Hendrix or Slash from Guns N’ Roses is not as foreign as the image of black female guitarists.”²⁹

Gospel Music

Gospel emerged from Black faith traditions fostered in the Black church in the 1920s, registering itself as a “sonic mix of Black sacred folk music traditions with noticeable blues and jazz rhythmic and harmonic influences.”³⁰ Like those genres, the electric guitar was influential in the sound and growth of gospel, and Sister Rosetta Tharpe became the first gospel star, “swinging” the “good news” with it. She showboated her way through the highly contested terrain of the secular and sacred in the 1940s. Tharpe was a rebel, violating stringent church protocol by performing in nonreligious spaces deemed profane. She did so, as Gayle Wald notes in her biography about Tharpe, understanding “herself doing God’s work as a popular musician.”³¹

Historically, for Black women, the church can be a double-edged sword. Black women can flourish and find respect as missionaries and musicians, but in some denominations, it is the norm to deny them ordination as ministers or entry into higher levels of church leadership. Nonetheless, Black women contemporary electric guitarists such as Jennifer Bliss and BB Queen have engaged the church as a critical space for participation in a Black cultural tradition that is supportive of their musicianship on the instrument, providing space for them to establish a more visible and valued presence.

The ability to play electric guitar increases a musician’s versatility. The church can be another avenue through which to earn money, playing during services and with gospel artists. For Bliss, an Atlanta-based singer-songwriter, session musician, and backup musician who has toured with artists from a wide variety of musical genres, from gospel (Fred

Hammond) to neo-soul (Musiq Soulchild), churches are a “good, steady gig,” alongside club gigs and corporate events, constituting the three C’s (church, club, corporate). BB Queen easily moves between clubs and churches: “I had my own tour bus, and I would change my clothes on the bus, walk off the bus, and go in the church because I would not miss my church gig on Sunday.”³²

In addition, Black woman electric guitarists such as Beverly “Guitar” Watkins construct a musical and religious coexistence with the electric guitar as a critical tool for evangelization: “When I go in clubs or whatever, I have 23rd Psalm prayer and I give them out as I sell my CDs. ‘Cause we, first, we got to give Him his first and then after that it’s ministering in music.”³³

The electric guitar is also a Black woman’s tool for spiritual expression used to praise and worship. BB Queen proclaimed that she “praises with that guitar.”³⁴ Watkins said her playing “turns water into wine.”³⁵ Watkins also believed that her ability to play the electric guitar was “a gift that God gave me. That’s my instrument he gave me to use in life.” When performing, she said, “When I get on stage, it’s all different. God and his angels take over on stage . . . the first note we [when playing with a band backing her up] do I’m gone. I’m flying. I’m gone.”

Sister Outsiders? Images and Expectations

Black women who choose to perform outside mainstream understandings of their place in music (through genre, instrument, or musical configuration) can face cognitive dissonance from people who do not expect them to have such a broad range of artistic ability and interest because Black women’s representational legacy as vocalists and their representational legacy within genres like R&B are so entrenched.³⁶ BB Queen said:

Fact of the matter is, I still walk into a place with a guitar, and they’ll say, “Oh, can you play that thing?” . . . And a guy can walk in and hold the guitar for me, and it’s, “Man, you play? Man, go on up there and hook up.” They assume that a guy can play and that a woman can’t . . . Every time I get up there with the guitar, I have to re-prove myself.³⁷

Similarly, for Bliss, people assume “all the time” that she is anything but the guitar player. “My guitar is right there, and they say, ‘So you sing background?’”³⁸ Suzanne Thomas said people would see her with her band and assumed there had to be another—male—electric guitarist yet to come because “this band absolutely could not possibly function . . . on the strength of one guitar player who’s a female.” They looked at her as if to

ask, “Well, when is the [real] guitar player going to get here?’ They always assume that as a female you’re only playing rhythm or acoustic guitar.”³⁹

Bliss, who trained in jazz playing in her undergraduate’s now-defunct jazz ensemble in the 1990s, takes pride in her versatility, especially in being able to play the *electric* guitar—not the acoustic guitar, which she can also play. She said: “I’ve always kind of had a chip on my shoulder [when people assume she only plays acoustic guitar]. I just don’t think I’m the kind of person that can be satisfied with playing three-chord songs or not being able to go into a jam session and just be like, ‘What!’”⁴⁰

Black women electric guitarists understand that making music, being creative, and seeking a way to be self-sufficient is a challenge for all women, regardless of race. And it is true that, regardless of race, many women electric guitarists share similar experiences of biased treatment based on gender within often oversexualized, hyper-masculine environments as professional artists seeking serious attention to their skill.

However, for Black women, their race is not divisible from their gender because Black women electric guitarists uniquely confront *both gender and racial* discrimination due to “a racialized, sexualized and exploitative history”⁴¹ that has resulted in Black women and their bodies becoming “systematically overdetermined and mythically configured.”⁴² Within this discourse of racialized femininity, Black women have been and continue to be marked and misconstrued as excessive and/or masculine, inherently and overtly sexual, voluminously loud, overweight, and brash in bodily deportment. By contrast, white women experience presumptions of their beauty and femininity that have never been accorded to Black women with or without an electric guitar.

Bliss, who was once signed to a contract with Arista Records in the 1990s when she was lead guitarist of a Black female rock band whose initial record company enthusiasm gave way to marketing malaise, says, “There is a pressure for women professionals to look a certain way, in order to be taken seriously, regardless of what their profession is, especially for those that are in show business. And if you’re Black, it’s all the more challenging. Black women’s beauty is not celebrated the same way white women’s beauty is.” She further expressed a deep concern for “what that does for the self-esteem of the woman, the Black woman in particular, because, as Americans, there’s a beauty standard that we’ll never meet.”⁴³ Bliss continues:

So much of our value is placed on our appearance, and if it fits in . . . and so much of how we feel about ourselves, let alone . . . our hair. You know if you are natural or you got dreadlocks, whatever, it’s just, it’s challenging. Especially now it just seems it’s more challenging than ever . . . for Black women’s beauty in all of its

glory and sizes and shapes and colors, to be celebrated and not feel like it has to be defended. And all the more so for every Black woman guitar player.⁴⁴

These kinds of interrelated issues of gender, race, and genre are things, Bliss observes, “Susan Tedeschi never has to deal with.”⁴⁵

Conclusion

The trail Memphis Minnie and Sister Rosetta Tharpe created is incontrovertibly and distinctively well-traveled. Two contemporary artists, in particular, have been able to reach career peaks in the form of popular success: Gabriella “H.E.R.” Wilson (b. 1997) and Brittany Howard (b. 1998) of the Alabama Shakes. Since her 2017 self-titled debut R&B album, H.E.R. has collected multiple Grammys, an Emmy Award, and an Academy Award for her music. At Tina Turner’s Rock & Roll Hall of Fame induction in 2021, H.E.R. performed a Turner tribute on electric guitar. Howard, too, has garnered multiple Grammy Awards and critical acclaim for her southern rock, where she has hewed out a space that she is all too aware has been exclusive. In 2020, without the Alabama Shakes, she became the first Black woman electric guitarist as a solo artist to be nominated in the Best Rock Performance category for the Grammys, an award she won with the band in 2016 (a feat because the award is dominated by white male musicians). In 2018, Howard and Felicia Collins performed at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremony for Sister Rosetta Tharpe.

It was a gratifying full-circle moment: two intergenerational, professional, electric-guitar-playing Black women from different backgrounds and eras showcasing their skills while paying homage to the accomplishments of one of their pioneer predecessors. Seeing them together on stage with a montage of Tharpe images cycling behind them evoked a visceral sense of the cultural imperative of Black women playing the electric guitar.

Weighed down by the gendered and racialized bias of the instrument that has segregated and stereotyped them because they are Black women, Howard and Collins used the iconic instrument to disrupt, at least for the moment, cultural fantasies of the electric guitar as the purview of whiteness and maleness while challenging narrow expectations of Black women’s musical capabilities and interests. They displayed a symbolic connection and material contribution to propagating African American musical traditions that make the electric guitar their heritage too. That evening they laid public claim to being contemporary inheritors of the long legacy of Black women electric guitarists in the United States.

Notes

1. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and The Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
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3. See Steve Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and The Shaping of Musical Experience* (Harvard University Press, 1999); Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (University of California Press, 2000), pp. 32–62.
4. Paul Garon and Beth Garon, *Woman with Guitar: Memphis Minnie's Blues* (Da Capo Press, 1992).
5. *Ibid.*
6. Gayle Wald, *Shout, Sister, Shout! The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe* (Beacon Press, 2007).
7. Maria V. Johnson, "Black Women Electric Guitarists and Authenticity in the Blues," in *Black Women and Music: More Than The Blues*, edited by Eileen M. Hayes and Linda F. Williams (University of Illinois Press, 2007), p. 66.
8. "Portsmouth Churches," *New Journal and Guide*, March 29, 1952.
9. "Rev. Harris Will be Guest Speaker," *New Journal and Guide*, May 1, 1965.
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21. See LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music That Developed from It* (Apollo Editions, 1963); Samuel B. Charters, *The Country Blues*, reprint (Da Capo Press, 1975); David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues* (University of California Press, 1982); William Barlow, "Looking Up At Down": *The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Temple University Press, 1989).
22. "The Magnolia Presents," *Atlanta Daily World*, September 4, 1960.
23. Beverly "Guitar" Watkins, in-person interview with author, 2011–2012.
24. BB Queen, phone interview with author, 2011–2012.
25. Johnson, "Black Women Electric Guitarists," p. 66.
26. Mahon, *Black Diamond Queens*, p. 272.
27. Suzanne Thomas, phone interview with author, 2011–2012.
28. See Gerri Hirshey, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: The True, Tough Story of Women in Rock* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001); Barbara O'Dair, ed., *Trouble Girls: The Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock* (Random House, 1997); Susan M. Shaw, *Girls Rock! Fifty Years of Women Making Music* (University Press of Kentucky, 2004).
29. Laina Dawes, *What Are You Doing Here? A Black Woman's Life and Liberation in Heavy Metal* (Bazillion Points, 2012), p. 169.

30. Birgitta Johnson, "Gospel Music," Oxford Bibliographies Online. Available at www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780190280024/obo-9780190280024-0052.xml (accessed August 23, 2017).
31. Wald, *Shout, Sister, Shout!*, p. xi.
32. BB Queen, phone interview.
33. Beverly "Guitar" Watkins, in-person interview with author, 2011–2012.
34. BB Queen, phone interview.
35. Beverly "Guitar" Watkins, in-person interview.
36. The title of this section is a riff on the title of the essay by Keidra Chaney, "Sister Outsider Headbanger: On Being a Black Feminist Metalhead," *Bitch Media*, November 30, 2000. Chaney's title was itself a riff on Audre Lorde's book, *Sister Outsider* (Crossing Press, 1984).
37. BB Queen, phone interview.
38. Jennifer Bliss, in-person interview with author, 2011–2012.
39. Suzanne Thomas, phone interview.
40. Jennifer Bliss, in-person interview.
41. Lisa Collins, "Economies of the Flesh: Representing the Black Female Body in Art," in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, edited by Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 103.
42. Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Duke University Press, 2006), p. 7.
43. Jennifer Bliss, in-person interview.
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