

LONESOME WOMAN BLUES

THE STORY OF ALICE MOORE

By Guido van Rijn



During a September 2003 research trip to Wisconsin, while working on my book 'Paramount's Rise And Fall - A History Of The Wisconsin Chair Co. And Its Recording Activities', doing some last minute research, I was a guest at the house of Dennis Klopp and Susan Kenny. Going through his collection I stumbled upon a 1934 Decca catalogue. It contained a photograph of Alice Moore with the caption: "Alice Moore, Little Alice From Saint Louis".

I asked Dennis for permission to copy the photo and he agreed. During that same stay the catalogue became lost and Dennis could not find it again. When returning to the Netherlands, empty handed, I told Paul Swinton about the photo. He told me he had seen it before, but could not trace it. Guido van Rijn, who did an album on Alice Moore on his Agram label in 1988, was even more excited than I was. Both of us waited impatiently to hear if Dennis had found the Moore photo. It took a further two years to obtain the photo. Thankfully, during a research trip in October, 2005, the photograph was re-discovered. It is reproduced here with the kind permission of Susan Kenny and Dennis Klopp.

Alex van der Tuuk.

"St. Louis lies west of the Mississippi River, its main thoroughfare running East-West from the waterfront. The principal Negro areas lie in the older parts of the City close to Downtown St. Louis and from Washington north, Lucas, Delmar, Franklin, Cole, Carr, Biddle O'Fallon and Cass run parallel to each other - streets whose names are familiar from the words and titles of many blues that have been recorded by the innumerable blues singers and musicians who lived and worked in the densely populated area". Alice Moore was probably born there in 1903. Of her pre-recording days nothing is known, except for three police arrests. On 7 March 1925 Alice was arrested for 'suspicion of gambling.' She gave her address as 2016 Walnut Street, her age as 21 and her birthplace as Tennessee. Her occupation was listed as 'housework'. She was arrested again on 27 March, but was now sent to the 'Health Department.' This might mean that she was arrested for prostitution and was sent to be checked for venereal disease. On 19 September 1926 she was arrested once more and charged with 'disturbing the peace.' This time she gave her address as 2118 Randolph Street.²

On 16 August 1929 she was in Richmond, Indiana to make her first recordings for Paramount, accompanied by trombonist Ike Rodgers (c. 1903-1941) and pianist Henry Brown (1906-1981). Alice recorded four songs and provided some vocal comment on four solo recordings by her accompanists. At the age of sixteen Henry Brown was playing regularly in bars and at rent parties and shortly after he became firm friends with Ike Rodgers. A few years older than Brown, Rodgers played rough 'gutbucket' trombone, employing a variety of tin cans, liquor glasses and other mutes of his own devising. Their friendship lasted until Rodgers' death in 1941, and all through that time they played together, sometimes as a duo, sometimes in

the company of guitarist Lawrence 'Papa Egg Shell' Casey or drummer Earle Bindley. Amongst the many places where they recorded the '9-0-5 Club,' the 'Blue Flame,' 'Jim's Place' on 23rd and Market, and particularly 'Katie Red's' in East St. Louis are outstanding in his memory. At many of these they accompanied Mary Johnson, Little Alice Moore, Robert Peeples and other blues singers from the district.³

The first Alice Moore recording, 'Black And Evil Blues,' a desperate song about a woman who thinks she is cursed and who does neither trust herself nor her boyfriends, became her trademark. She recorded four versions of it in 1929, 1934, 1935 and 1937. This original version of 1929 was covered by Lil Johnson on 16 September 1936 and released on Vocalion 03374.

Three months later Alice, Henry and Ike traveled to Grafton, Wisconsin to make some more recordings. Six Alice Moore tracks have been found so far, but there may well be more. Other artists who recorded at the same time were George Allison & Willie White, Mary Johnson, Robert Peeples and Wesley Wallace.

On 17 November 1930 Alice probably recorded for Victor under the pseudonym Alice Melvin. Although these four songs remain unissued, two of the titles, 'Lonesome Woman Blues' and 'Trouble Blues' were to be recorded by Alice Moore on 24 August 1934.

For the next four years Alice did not make any records at all. The reason for her absence from the recording studio is no doubt to be found in the Depression. Henry Brown told Paul Oliver that he and Ike Rodgers worked together on W.P.A. projects in the worst years of the Depression. They labored in a road construction gang and cut stone in a quarry.⁴

Alice Moore's voice sounds more relaxed in 1929 than in the period from 1934 to 1937. After the Depression her voice is louder, as she puts more force on the larynx and produces more nasal sounds in the higher range. Her sliding introductions are strong responses to the trombone sound, just as the final notes slide downwards with a glissando. A typical guttural blues vibrato is used for the tone embellishments. Alice strictly uses her middle register, on speech level, never the high or falsetto register.

On 18 August 1934 Alice started a series of nine recording sessions for Decca in Chicago. Ike and Henry were at her side again. She started with a remake of 'Black And Evil Blues.' On 'Riverside Blues' there is no trombone. The violin which is featured instead is played by Artie Mosby, a St. Louis violinist of the twenties and thirties. The *Chicago Defender* of 27 September 1927 mentions the Royal Gypsy Orchestra, of which Artie Mosby was then a member. The orchestra performed in the New Washington Theatre on 23rd & Market Street in St. Louis. On the piano stool was good old Roosevelt Sykes. Trumpeter Zilner T. Randolph and drummer Lige (= Elijah) Shaw remembered Artie Mosby as a member of the Criterion Theatre Band of St. Louis in 1928. Other band members were Louis Crenshaw (piano) and Shirley Clay (trumpet). On 22 September 1932 Artie Mosby had accompanied Mary Johnson, Ethel Smith, Jimmie Oden and Roosevelt Sykes. Mosby's sound differs totally from the country blues violinists. He was probably classically trained as he plays with ease in several difficult keys and uses an almost classical vibrato on the long notes in the break. In 'Riverside Blues' Mosby fills in the breaks in a soft, jazzy way. On all four 1934 recording the singer is called 'Little Alice From St. Louis'.

The two tracks of 24 August are the fastest in her repertoire. All the other tracks are andante, but these two are 108 MM.

In 1947 a Houston pianist called Leroy Ervin recorded Alice Moore's 'Blue, Black And Evil' for Swing 415 and Gold Star 628. The track has been reissued on Arhoolie LP 206. Ervin hums an imitation of Rodgers' trombone. The arrangement, the tempo and the lyrics are similar to the Decca 7028 version by Alice Moore and it seems likely that Ervin picked the song up by listening to the record. In 1970 Leroy was still in the Houston telephone book, but Mike Leadbitter's attempt to contact him failed.

In 1960 Henry Brown remembered those days very well: "Henry Townsend played guitar and Little Alice sang. We'd play joints on Franklin ... Delmar ... Easton ... spots in East St. Louis - like the Blue Flame Club. Come on up I got a job workin' at the Edwin Brothers Shoe Company on Washington Avenue. I had a piano in the back of the warehouse there; when I knock off I could kick 'em down again".⁵

In the sleeve notes to the Magpie Piano Blues series Bob Hall and Richard Noblett called Henry Brown "the archetypal pianist of the St. Louis style. His relaxed barrelhouse style is bouncy with a sensitive touch. He uses a 4/4 chorded bass in favor of a single note pattern interspersed with eight to the bar walking octaves, while retaining his simple melodic right hand phraseology".⁶

Henry Townsend (b. 1909) remembered Alice too. In 1960 he told Paul Oliver: "She was a real nice girl. She was real devoted to her blues singing. From my point of it she was pretty well a nice mixer with the public and a fairly intelligent girl. They used to call her Little Alice - well she was quite small I think at the time they adopted the name to her as Little Alice, but later I think she defeated that name, by getting quite some size - she got extra

size before she died about ten or twelve years ago. Henry Brown has played for Alice Moore, for a fact I think he started her out, and she was a devoted blues singer. Well I feel that blues has its own to do with you."⁷

In 1986 Townsend told Bill Greensmith: "I remember Alice Moore. She was a beautiful person, a kind-hearted person. She was a very nice-looking black gal. She was almost what you would call a pretty girl. She had a beautiful smooth skin like velvet. I think that had a lot to do with her death too. It sounds kinda off the wall, but sometimes a lot of things are against a person that don't have an understanding about how to handle it. I think it contributed to her living a little fast. Alice Moore, Ike Rodgers, and Henry Brown was a trio. I never worked with them, but I was around them quite a bit. All of that started at Charley Houston's; matter of fact, Alice roomed there at Charley Houston's place. Alice seemed to be slightly my senior, but not by no big difference. But from maturity, she seemed to be a little more mature than I was. Her 'Black And Evil' was a hit right away, that first one. She was a pretty black woman - ain't no doubt about that - but the evil part, she wasn't evil, I don't think. But I never was her man, and that's the only way you're ever going to find that out. She may have been, but she never did show it on the surface; she always showed kindness, everybody like her. I don't know how Alice died or why. It appears to me like I would have heard about it or somebody would have said something about it, as many people that knew her and me. I'm inclined to believe that whenever she died, it was one of the times that I was away for some reason. A lot of the stuff Alice recorded Henry Brown worked with her, but Jimmy Gordon played piano on one of her sessions. I met Jimmy in Chicago; he was pretty famous around there for a long time, but I don't remember Jimmy ever playing in St. Louis."⁸

After 1934 Brown and Rodgers no longer accompanied Alice on record. The combination of piano and trombone had first been used on 23 July 1924, when Fletcher Henderson and Charlie Green backed Bessie Smith. Green accompanied several other blues singers like Bessie Brown, Ida Cox, Maggie Jones, Ozie McPherson, Ma Rainey, Clara Smith, Trixie Smith, George Williams and Lena Wilson. Other trombonists who occasionally accompanied blues singers were Bert Johnson (possibly from Texas), Roy Palmer (from New Orleans), Jake Frazier and Joe Williams (both from Charleston, SC). There is only one conclusion possible: with no fewer than twenty-six blues like Rodgers is the blues trombone king of the pre-war period. His sense of pitch is unrivalled.

The cooperation with Henry Brown had been very intense indeed. Brown always showed a great respect for the singer in his accompaniments. Alice Moore was thus given ample room to deliver her message. On 17 July 1935 Brown's place at the piano was taken by William Bunch, better known as Peetie Wheatstraw (1902-1941). Peetie was as proficient on the piano as he was on the guitar.

Two days later Peetie switched to his guitar. His place on the piano stool was now taken by his pupil Jimmie Gordon (b. c. 1906 in St. Louis). Gordon claimed to be Peetie's Brother, but his piano technique was rather limited, so he often used other pianists to accompany him. Gordon indeed sounds a bit uncertain here and certainly less powerful. His presence here is a fact as Alice shouts his name in both recordings. 'Blue Black And Evil Blues' is the third version of her signature tune.

One year later Peetie was back at the piano. On 22 May 1936 James 'Kokomo' Arnold (1901-1969) played the guitar. While Wheatstraw continues his continuous melodic lines, Arnold keeps the volume of his guitar somewhat down during the singing, and comes back full force to fill the gaps. The songs of this and other 1936 sessions are often credited to M. Harris(t)on. This was possibly a record company executive who robbed Alice of her royalties. There might be a connection with the James Hairston composer credits on the 1936 Frank James session. James plays in the St. Louis style too. The spoken comment in 'Dark Angel' shows how familiar she was with Peetie. She gives him with his whiskey drinking: 'can't stay drunk all the time'.

The last Alice Moore recordings were made during four sessions in 1937. There is an unknown string bass on these recordings who accents the first and third beats and plucks and slaps mainly in a four to the bar rhythm. All these recordings are credited to 'Jordan' so we may safely assume that Charley Jordan was present. The accompanists are not very audible. The guitar is probably played with a flat-pick. The melody of the piano is followed with single string runs on the highest strings, frequent choking of the blue notes and an occasional lower bass string run. Sometimes there is a chordal intermezzo on the highest strings. The guitarist must have known Peetie's playing very well as the two form a real team. I think Charley Jordan is the guitarist on the 1937 Alice Moore dates.

Mike Stewart and Don Kent make the following remarks about Alice's vocals: "Her singing style, with its particular stresses, and choppy, exclaimed phrasing, was not especially unusual. No one, however, converted it to quite such a mannerism. Teddy Darby's post-1933 sides employ this heavy accented style, and Charlie McFadden's delivery is similar; other blues singers appeared to copy it."⁹

On 26 March 1937 Alice recorded 'Don't Deny Me Baby' on which Peetie's name is mentioned again.

On the tenth session of 26 October 1937 the piano is certainly not by Peetie Wheatstraw. In the solos the right hand switches from higher to lower octaves, uses tremolos and sliding notes. There is a simple octave bass in the left hand and now and then the melody is retarded. This session is clasped in between two Roosevelt Sykes sessions. I have no doubt about the presence of Roosevelt Sykes here. The bass player is far more interesting than his colleague of the eighth and ninth sessions. He has more rhythmic variations and a far greater propulsive power thanks to the use of dotted eighth notes. The guitarist plays hardly audible chords and boogie runs on the lower strings in the first position. 'Push Cart Pusher' may very well be about Peetie Wheatstraw. In the daytime he pushes rags and bottles, at night



Label shots courtesy Guido van Rijn.

he pushes little Alice. In Ralph Ellison's awe-inspiring first novel 'Invisible Man' (1952) Peetie pushes a hundred pounds of blueprints. 'I'm a piano player and a rounder, a whisky drinker and a pavement pounder. I'll teach you some good bad habits.'¹⁰

There are eight unissued titles from the final 1937 sessions in the discography: 'Humming Bird Man' (25 March); 'He's Mine All Mine' (26 March); 'Hod Carrier Blues' and 'Poosy Cat Blues' (26 October); 'Men Are Like Street Cars' and 'Gone Hog Wild' (28 October); 'I Give You Money' and 'My Blues Is Like Whiskey' (29 October). I think there is a strong possibility that at least some of these sides were not recorded by Alice Moore, but by Rosetta Howard. Howard recorded 'My Blues Is like Whiskey' and 'Hog-Wild Blues' on 8 June 1939 and 'Men Are like Street Cars' and 'He's Mine All Mine' on 14 June 1939.

The lyrics of her songs reinforce the idea suggested by the St. Louis police files and by Henry Townsend's observations that Alice Moore worked as a prostitute. Some of them are about good-time women walking the streets who are jailed for the offence. There is a lot of violence in them and they have suicidal overtones. 'Little Alice from St. Louis' sings about being black and evil. The men call her 'Little Dark Angel' and she can 'boot that thing.'

In 1960 Henry Townsend stated that Alice Moore had died ten or twelve years previously.¹¹ This would mean that she died c. 1950. Early in 1954 reports came in that she was still in St. Louis,¹² but no trace of her was found. In 1969 Mike Stewart confirmed that Alice Moore was dead.¹³

This essay was based on my sleeve notes to Alice Moore, 'Lonesome Woman Blues,' Agram Blues AB LP 2013, a 1987 album that was never reviewed, not even in Blues & Rhythm.

In 1994 Alice Moore's recordings were issued on Document DOCD 5290 and 5291 with notes by Chris Smith.

Thanks to Cor van Slidregt, Chris Smith, Alex van der Tuuk, Hans Vergeer and Karl Gert zur Heide.

NOTES:

- 1 Paul Oliver. Sleeve notes to 'Henry Brown Blues', 77 LA 12-5, an album of 1960 Henry Brown recordings.
- 2 Bill Greensmith. 'Henry Townsend: A Blueslife As Told To Bill Greensmith'. Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999, p. 120.
- 3 Oliver, (Henry Brown Blues).
- 4 Oliver, (Henry Brown Blues).
- 5 Paul Oliver. 'Conversation With The Blues', Cassell & Company Ltd, 1967, pp. 104/5.
- 6 Bob Hall and Richard Noblett, sleeve notes to 'Whip It To A Jelly, The Piano Blues, Volume One', Paramount 1929-30, Magpie PY LP 4401, 1977.
- 7 Oliver ('Conversation With The Blues'), pp. 104-5.
- 8 Greensmith (Henry Townsend), pp. 58-9.
- 9 Mike Stewart and Don Kent. Sleeve notes to 'Hard Time Blues', Mammoth LP S 3806.
- 10 Ralph Ellison. 'Invisible Man', Penguin Books, 1984 (first published in the USA, 1952), p. 144.
- 11 Oliver, ('Conversation With The Blues'), pp. 104-5.
- 12 Paul E. Affeldt. 'Report On The Re-Discovery Project'. The Jazz Report, Volume III, No. 2, February 1955.
- 13 Mike Stewart. 'Backwards Sam In St. Louis'. Blues Unlimited 72, May 1970, p. 13.