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Black Women Electric Guitarists and Authenticity in the Blues

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The fact is, I'm an African American female playing what I do, and that is quite a feat in itself. . . . I don't know why there aren't that many of us. . . . It's important for people to know that, yeah, African American women do play guitar and do play blues and rock and roll.

—Deborah Coleman

People are surprised when a Black woman can play the guitar like a man. . . . I say, "Just wait until showtime comes." Then when I go on and come off they say, "Damn, I ain't never seen nothing like you."

—Beverly "Guitar" Watkins

Let's get together just you and me
Let's sing the blues . . . then you will see
Why I'm everybody's favorite, qualified and able
Everybody's favorite, ready when you call my name.

—BB Queen, "Everybody's Favorite (Qualified and Able)"

African American women such as Memphis Minnie (1897–1973) and Rosetta Tharpe (1915–73) were among the pioneers of the electric guitar. Recording prolifically for three decades in an evolving style, Minnie was one of the most influential blues performers ever to record. She was one of the first to use a National resonator guitar and one of the first to plug in. Living and working in Chicago beginning in 1930, Minnie first used an electric instrument on eight sides recorded in December 1941. Pete Welding cites these records as "among the earliest signposts to the electrically amplified

[postwar] ensemble blues style."[1] Witnessing Minnie in a Chicago club on New Years Eve 1942, Langston Hughes, entranced by the blues she conjured on the cutting edge of the latest technology, vividly describes Minnie's bridging of urban and rural, old and new, downhome blues in the city:

> Memphis Minnie sits on top of the icebox at the 230 Club in Chicago and beats out blues on an electric guitar. [She] sings through a microphone and her voice—hard and strong anyhow for a little woman's—is made harder and stronger by scientific sound. . . . Through the smoke and racket of the noisy Chicago bar float Louisiana bayous, muddy old swamps, Mississippi dust and sun, cotton fields, lonesome roads, train whistles in the night. . . . Big rough old Delta cities too. . . . Northern cities, W.P.A., Muscle Shoals. . . . All these things cry through the strings on Memphis Minnie's electric guitar, amplified to machine proportions—a musical version of electric welders plus a rolling mill. . . . Negro heartbeats mixed with iron and steel.[2]

The dazzling guitar work, powerhouse vocals, and riveting performance style of Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the controversial but undisputed queen of gospel blues in the 1930s and 1940s, likewise influenced performers across a wide variety of genres.[3] Mavis Staples says, "I used to love to hear her and see her too 'cause she would come up on one leg and she would just rock it, you know!"[4] A pioneer of the Nashville steel guitar in the 1930s, Tharpe switched to an electric instrument in the 1940s. Performing in a wide variety of contexts—solo, big band, R&B, and doo-wop—Tharpe played the guitar with an unmatched authority and percussive power.[5] Of her early recordings with the Sammy Price trio in 1944, critic Ken Romanowski writes:

> Their first release was a huge influence on the budding white and black boogie styles that eventually coalesced into rock and roll. . . . Her guitar introductions and solos certainly sound as if they had an impact upon the guitarists who came of age after the Second World War, with extensive use of triplets against the eight-to-the-bar boogie underpinning, double-stops, and dramatic slurs—all utilized with an uncanny sense of when and where to place each riff for maximum effect.[6]

Tharpe's powerful stage presence and command of the electric guitar is demonstrated in a video of her performing "Down by the Riverside" with a male vocal group behind her.[7] She moves around the stage as if the guitar is a part of her. When she takes a solo, she cocks her head to one side, crosses her legs, and deftly executes a rapid-fire succession of notes. She repeats a riff, then bends a note expressively, lifting her guitar into the air. Moving from the lower frets and register to high up on the neck, she arrives at another bent note, which she sustains with the left hand while waving her right hand back and forth to the beat.

Today, despite the perseverance and success of women such as Minnie and Tharpe in transgressing the gender divide, the blues is still largely male dominated, especially with respect to instrumentalists, and most especially electric guitarists. As in jazz and pop music in general, there has always been a place for female singers, a smaller place for female piano players, and, more recently, a place for female solo singers with acoustic guitar. But while electric-guitar-wielding blues women slowly gain visibility, African American women like Deborah Coleman, who sing and play hard-driving styles, remain an anomaly.[8] This is not to say that other Black blues women playing electric guitar do not exist. Barbara Lynn and Beverly "Guitar" Watkins, for example, have been playing since the late fifties/early sixties, but only recently have their lead capabilities even been hinted at on recordings. There are also a few younger players, such as BB Queen of Detroit, who with the support of Koko Taylor recorded her debut album in 1997, and child prodigy Venessia Young of Clarksdale, Mississippi, whose talent was discovered and nurtured through the Blues Education Program at the Delta Blues Museum.[9]

While White women blues guitarists from Bonnie Raitt to Susan Tedeschi and Black women blues singers from Koko Taylor and Etta James to Shemekia Copeland have received considerable attention, Black female electric guitarists (with the exception of Deborah Coleman) remain relatively unknown. How is it that, though African American women were among the first to plug in sixty years ago, one critic describes Deborah Coleman as an "African-American Bonnie Raitt"?[10] How is it that a White woman becomes the measuring stick for female guitarists within a Black cultural form? And why are critics are so unused to seeing Black women playing electric guitar? Why are they not more numerous and/or visible today?

To address these issues, several important factors must be considered: (1) entrenched notions of authenticity cultivated in blues scholarship and journalism that from the outset have determined who gets recognized, recorded, and studied as well as how they are perceived and received; (2) longstanding conventions about gender roles in music, and in blues and jazz in particular, that from the beginning have mitigated against women's involvement, particularly as instrumentalists; and (3) the diminishing involvement of African Americans in the blues starting in the 1960s, the simultaneous increase in the interest and involvement of Whites, and the issues surrounding these phenomena.

Extending my work on Black female guitarists in the blues, this chapter examines how the discourse of authenticity, inflected by notions about race, gender, class, color, age, and style, pervades the critical perception, reception, and self-presentation of blues performers such that African American female electric guitar players continue to be seen as anomalies.[11] Focusing on four contemporary Black female electric blues guitarists, I demonstrate how dominant conceptions of authenticity in the blues coupled with mainstream constructions of race and gender have ensured that this group remains small and invisible. Moreover, I bring into view and begin to document the creative expression of African American female electric guitarists.[12]

Authenticity and the Blues

The history of blues scholarship and journalism is characterized by a concern with authenticity and a strict code of what qualifies as "authentic" blues. In an early classic text, *Urban Blues* (1966), Charles Keil dubbed this tendency "the moldy fig mentality."[13] In discussing why contemporary urban blues had received so little scholarly attention, Keil humorously delineated the requirements for "real" blues implicit in blues scholarship. These same qualities are reflected in a joke that has circulated in varied forms on the Internet as "a primer for singing" or "how-to kit for writing The Blues."[14] In sum, to be authentic, a musician must be Black, male, old, born into poverty on a farm in the rural South, and taught by a legend on a cheap mail-order or homemade guitar; they must also perform in a rustic, "rough-hewn" acoustic style and have struggled, suffered, and remained broke and obscure. Keil lists these characteristics with tongue clearly in cheek, but current views of authentic blues often verge on the same kind of caricature.

Traditional definitions of blues have justified a lack of attention to women's blues for many years. Scholars have dismissed women's blues as inauthentic because women were primarily associated with vaudeville blues, which was urban, professional, theatrical (performed on stages), and glamorous. Since rural blues performers were assumed to be male, women who played rural blues were not "seen." Memphis Minnie, one of the few whose success earned her notice, transgressed the gender divide by playing the part of the hard-drinking, rough-talking, tobacco-chewing blues *man* and by performing with her male partners.[15] Scholars' gendered dichotomization and periodicization of blues history has obscured the existence of an ongoing sustained tradition of women's blues—a tradition that has included instrumentalists as well as singers and performers and composers in a whole range of styles, including rural, vaudeville, urban, R&B, boogie woogie, and contemporary.[16]

Traditional notions of blues authenticity are as entrenched today as they were forty years ago. In a 1997 review of an album of women's blues called *Barrelhouse Women, 1925–1930, Living Blues* writer Peter Aschoff notes:

> While Evelyn Brickey and Katherine Adkins come dangerously close, both musically and lyrically, to crossing the line separating the barrelhouse from the vaudeville stage, Bertha Ross, Frances Wallace, and Clara Burston are all roots blues singers whose work stands up solidly against better-known down-home blueswomen. . . . Burston and Wallace sing in a strong, gutsy juke-joint style light years removed from the polished, vaudeville-influenced manner so common among blues women singers of the period.[17]

In the traditional blues canon, created largely by White male scholars, "Down-home" (i.e., "strong, gutsy juke-joint style") singing is valued and considered authentic, while vaudeville (i.e., "polished") singing is not. These styles are seen as dichotomous, and any mixing of styles is perceived as transgressive.[18] These categories were also implicit in the division of music papers at the 2001 Delta Blues Symposium, where some of the material in this chapter was first presented.[19] Papers were divided into two sessions, one titled "'Strictly' the Blues," and the other, where this paper was scheduled, "The Blues and Beyond the Blues." The response of one White male to the paper made it clear that the questions, mode of analysis, and subject itself tread upon forbidden ground. The respondent objected to the introduction of what he perceived to be "academic" categories of race, class, and gender into what he viewed as simply "a matter of taste." According to his reasoning, if Black women guitarists are incapable of garnering an audience, they must ultimately lack the talent. And since these artists did not "do anything" for him, we should not impose our tastes on others.[20]

In her article "Women and the Electric Guitar," Mavis Bayton demonstrates that traditional gender socialization provides numerous obstacles to women taking up the instrument even today.[21] The genres dominated by electric guitars (rock and blues) as well as jazz have been strongly male-identified. As arenas historically for the assertion of masculinity, blues, jazz, and rock performance have been most resistant to accepting women. While adolescent boys are encouraged and even expected to play guitar as part of their social/sexual identity, girls, who have not been privy to these social spaces, typically lack role models and family support, along with the necessary training and experience.

In terms of gender, women in blues, jazz, and rock/pop have functioned primarily as objects for the male gaze. Female performers have often been hired more for their looks than for their musicianship, typically, according

to a European American standard of beauty, requiring a slim "sexy" figure with light skin. In addition to racism and class discrimination, colorism has been a factor in women's blues from the start. For example, as Bessie Smith's first recordings were rejected for sounding "too black," she was also fired from a show early in her career, the theme of which was "Glorifying the Brown Skin Girl," because her skin was deemed too dark.[22] African American women have had to negotiate prevalent stereotypes reflected in images like the mammy and the jezebel perpetuated by the minstrel tradition. In blues and jazz, female vocalists have been much more readily accepted than instrumentalists, as there is no external instrument obstructing the view of their body. Piano has been the most acceptable instrument for a woman to play, as it was an essential part of the preparation for "ladyhood" among the White middle class starting in the nineteenth century. Horns have been off limits for women because they distort the face, and drums and the electric guitar have been taboo because they are considered power instruments. The electric guitar has been especially threatening because of its phallic associations and potential for intensity and volume.[23]

In the 1960s, the period of the so-called blues revival, many White college students became interested and involved in the blues. Black blues performers from the past were "rediscovered" and brought out of obscurity and retirement to perform at coffee houses and folk festivals, and Whites began learning to perform old blues styles from records and sometimes from the masters themselves.[24] At the same time, Black young people were drawn in the direction of soul and Motown, then funk and disco, and, finally, hip-hop.

Gaye Adegbalola, founding member of the middle-aged interracial trio Saffire—The Uppity Blues Women, suggests several reasons African Americans in general are not as involved in the blues today:

> Number one: it's just been here and gone. In the same way that rap is here now and it might not be 50 years from now. But it's here now because the technology is [such] that you can create beats and you can say more with poetry than you can in a song. . . . In the Black community one dance would only be around for a year. . . . I think you have to have music for the dance and I think part of what's missing in the blues world [today] is the dance. Everything is so technical and crisp . . . and the dance is missing. I think that the blues was prominent too because you had a guitar and a harmonica, and you could bring it to a house party and lots of folks didn't have big stereos. . . . [Now] you hop into a house party and you put on a disc. It's changing times. . . . More Black women are starting to come to our concerts, but you would think, given the nature of the material, that there would be a lot of Black women at our shows. . . . What radio station is gonna play our music? Well it might be a college station at two in the morning. Black folks don't listen to that.[25]

As the audience for the blues became whiter, the context, function, and aesthetics of blues performance shifted. This trend began in the 1950s, when rhythm and blues transitioned to rock 'n' roll, moving from the Black community into the White mainstream, where multi-performer concerts in big cities replaced intimate dance-oriented shows on makeshift stages. In the 1960s, blues music began to be separated from the dancing. Since then, an emphasis on technical precision has sometimes eclipsed the centrality of total involvement by performers and audience. And yet, despite the changing color of the blues, there have been and continue to be African Americans interested and involved. Many African Americans, while hidden from the limelight, have been instrumental in keeping the traditional aesthetics of blues performance (call and response, dance, full participation) alive. In an interview, Taj Mahal noted that when he was coming up in the 1960s, "very few of the young Black kids were interested in that kind of stuff [the blues]." At the same time, he insisted "there were a lot" of other Black kids involved.[26] Deborah Coleman commented in one recent interview that "African Americans for the most part don't embrace the blues."[27] However, in another interview, she did acknowledge a growing African American female presence in the blues.[28] Like many in Black communities, both these artists reflect a general ambivalence about the historical involvement of African Americans in the blues. Among those keeping the blues alive with their electrifying and engaging performances are Beverly "Guitar" Watkins, Barbara Lynn, Deborah Coleman, and BB Queen.

Beverly "Guitar" Watkins (b. 1939)

> Listen up now people, let me tell you 'bout the headline news . . .
> Red mama's back in town and sure 'nuff she's gonna play you some blues
> —"Red Mama Blues"

> You don't need no shots, you don't need no pills;
> let my guitar cure all your ills
> They call me Miz Dr. Feelgood, I said hey hey hey
> Well it's my time now, gonna rock your blues away
> —"Miz Dr. Feelgood"

Beverly "Guitar" Watkins is indeed "back in business," as the title of her 2000 solo debut album asserts, thanks to the Music Maker Relief Fund and

Taj Mahal's endorsement. Actually, she has never been out of business, just out of view, for she has performed professionally since the late fifties, when she first played rhythm guitar in Piano Red's bands—the Meter-Tones, the Houserockers, and Dr. Feelgood and the Interns.[29] In the latter band, she wore a nurse's uniform while her band mates dressed in doctor suits.[30] A caretaker image that derives from the mammy stereotype, the nurse outfit no doubt helped to neutralize the gender boundary Watkins crossed by playing electric guitar in public with a band of men. Back then, she says, "I didn't do nothing but looked pretty and played rhythm."[31] After the Interns disbanded, Watkins performed in a long succession of different bands, and somewhere along the way she started singing and playing lead guitar. Her perseverance seems to have been fueled by her early experiences. "I kept on," she says. "Blues is about just like I came up. My mother passed when I was three months old. I was raised up with different aunties. A lot of people have to drink to play. . . . I don't have to do that, because the blues are already in me."[32] Watkins was also inspired early on by the records of Rosetta Tharpe: "There was something about this woman playing the guitar. . . . It was surprising."[33]

Today, as a leader of her own band, Watkins "surprises" as Tharpe did over fifty years ago, pulling out all the stops and playing the guitar, in her words, "like a man." Peter Cooper describes a 1999 performance:

> Beverly "Guitar" Watkins comes out of nowhere. And she's led by a Fender Mustang guitar. . . . She leaps and points the guitar neck and shouts and struts and poses. Then she runs and drops to her knees. . . . [She] gets a standing ovation after each song. Then all of a sudden she turns her back and lifts that red guitar up and over her head. . . . She sets it behind her head and plays it like it's a normal thing for a 59-year old woman to do on a Thursday night in Charlotte.[34]

On *Back in Business* (fig. 2.1) her first recording in forty years, Watkins tells the world that she is here, here to stay, and here to be reckoned with. In typical blues fashion, she "talks back" to her colleagues and mentors as she pays homage to the tradition. The CD's opening song, "Miz Dr. Feelgood," for example, references Piano Red's hit, "Doctor Feelgood," acknowledging her time with him while telling everyone, "It's my time now" to be in the spotlight. At the same time, Watkins tips her hat to soul-blues queen Aretha Franklin and performs a moving personalized interpretation of Red's song. In "I'm Gonna Rock Some More" (by Joe Thomas and Howard Biggs), Watkins gives a respectful nod to vaudeville blues foremothers such as Lillian Miller

Fig. 2.1. The cover of Beverly "Guitar" Watkins's CD *Back in Business*, 2000. Music Maker 91007-2. Front cover by Paul Markow. Photo courtesy of Tim Duffy.

when she sings, "You can't keep a good woman down / Where there's rockin' I'll be around."[35] Finally, in "Red Mama Blues," the highlight of the album, Watkins announces her presence and that of her trademark red guitar, dishing up a good portion of her assertive, no-holds-barred instrumental work.

Complementing the message of the music, the CD's cover photo is a striking image of Watkins, center stage, alone, eyes closed and on her knees, playing her electric guitar through an amp on a corky, sand-colored carpet. Behind her, a dirt road lined with tall cactuses extends back into the desert, purple hills and blue sky in the background. This dramatic image seems to simultaneously embody isolation and visibility, freedom and vulnerability—Watkins center stage in a solo venture on a road few have traveled before.

Barbara Lynn (b. 1942)

> There's no one as great as Aretha, but other than maybe Etta James there's no one even near as good as Barbara Lynn. And no one walks on earth that is a better entertainer. I've been booking her since the first year of the club. Her SXSW set two years ago was the best one of the whole festival.
>
> —Antone of Antone's Blues Club, Austin, Texas

R&B vocalist, left-handed guitarist and East Texas native Barbara Lynn—fifty seven years young . . . reprised her 1962 hit, "You'll Lose a

> Good Thing" . . . with undiminished grace and poise, pouring a lifetime of blues and wisdom into her delivery and punctuating her climactic testifying with exclamatory stabs of lead guitar.
>
> —David Fricke, review of 1999 SXSW conference

A left-handed guitar player from a "distinguished family of Beaumont [Texas] Creoles,"[36] Barbara Lynn started on piano but was inspired by Elvis Presley to take up the guitar. "I wanted to do something odd," she says. "I thought it would be odd for a lady playing guitar."[37] "I felt if he could fake playing guitar, then surely I could do it for real."[38] Impressed with her quick mastery of the ukelele, Lynn's parents bought her a Gibson guitar.[39] In high school she fronted an all-girl band, Bobby Lynn and the Idols, doing Elvis covers: "I swung my instrument and we all wore pants." She also started writing her own songs and was picked up by Huey Meaux, with whom she sang and recorded her first and greatest hit, "You'll Lose a Good Thing," which topped the R&B charts in 1962. Subsequently, the Rolling Stones recorded another Lynn song, "Oh Baby (We Got a Good Thing Goin')," she appeared on Dick Clark's *American Bandstand* twice, and she toured with Stevie Wonder, Gladys Knight, Smokey Robinson, and Tina Turner. Lynn's parents, who had been eager for her to go to college, began to encourage her musical pursuits.

In spite of these early successes, Lynn's lead guitar playing was not recorded until 1994, when she was fifty-two years old.[40] Over the last few years Lynn has finally been getting some long-overdue recognition. In 1999, she won the Rhythm and Blues Foundation's Pioneer Award and was featured in an interview-portrait in *Living Blues* magazine. In 2000, she released a new CD, *Hot Night Tonight,* on Antone's Records that showcases her soulful singing and funky, understated guitar playing alongside her son's hip-hop vocals.

The few critics who have written about Lynn conjure her authenticity in contradictory ways. In Bill Dahl's interview feature, for example, both interviewer and interviewee seem eager to establish at the outset a sense of Lynn's authenticity by focusing on her blues roots. Dahl begins by quoting Lynn, who says she was "raised around the blues. That's all I ever heard. We'd turn on our little radio and we'd hear these blues singers from way back. I can remember my mother and father dancing off that music. So I couldn't help but be inclined to do . . . the blues."[41] The fact that Lynn was exposed to the blues first seems to legitimate her move to soul/R&B. Dahl mentions Elvis's influence only after establishing Lynn's blues and then R&B (i.e., Black) roots. In contrast, the accounts of Lynn given on her CD liner notes begin with Elvis Presley's influence. In his liner notes to Lynn's latest recording,

John Nova Lomax is also quick to emphasize Lynn's "distinguished" Creole background (read: light skin, higher-class status),[42] an image reflected in the photo of her on the album's cover. On the front cover of *Hot Night Tonight,* Lynn sits on one side of a table/booth, hands and legs crossed, wearing an elegant sleeveless dress, high heels, and short wavy hair; her guitar sits across from her, leaning against the wall. Most every reviewer includes her youthful good looks and sex appeal as among Lynn's assets as a performer, and her CD covers reflect a conscious marketing of this aspect. On the front cover of *So Good* (1994), for example, Lynn's bare shoulder is prominent as she caresses her instrument and smiles at the camera.

Barbara Lynn has received more attention than Beverly Watkins, undoubtedly due to her "youthful good looks" and early singing and songwriting successes, but also, probably, because her guitar playing is more restrained and less in-your-face (i.e., more traditionally feminine). Appealing to the racialized hierarchy of socioeconomic status based on skin color, Lynn's visual and aural self-presentation also project a higher class background than that of Beverly Watkins. Whereas Watkins's vocals are smoky with a pronounced dialect and her guitar solos free and filled with distortion, Lynn's vocals are smooth and her guitar work clean and controlled.

Beverly Watkins and Barbara Lynn epitomize the contradictions of the marketplace that mitigate against the perception of African American women as "real" blues performers. Blues authenticity requires performers to be Black, old, and poor, while gender socialization demands that female performers look young, beautiful, light-skinned, sexy, and glamorous (i.e., "classy"). Watkins may be Black, old, and working class, but she is not sexy, young looking, beautiful, or glamorous by the dominant society's standards. Lynn may be old, young-looking, and beautiful, but could a woman of her class background have sufficiently suffered?

Deborah Coleman (b. 1956)

In reviews and interviews, Deborah Coleman is often presented as the *only* Black women electric blues guitarist. She is by far the most visible and prolific songwriter/performer, with seven solo albums and thirty-four original songs to her credit in ten years, including five recordings for the "mainstream" blues label Blind Pig. She is an attractive, personable performer, full of energy, and is often described as looking younger than her age. As many writers have noted, Coleman's route to the blues was quite removed from the prescribed one. She grew up in predominantly White neighborhoods on military bases

in Virginia, California, Illinois, and Washington state. Seeing the Monkees on television inspired her to take up the guitar; hearing Jimi Hendrix inspired her to learn to play lead. She listened to and played rock first, then R&B, then blues. And yet, moving from town to town and school to school, she had her own brand of blues growing up. Coleman often felt alone and isolated, and the guitar provided comfort and solace. Despite discouragement from family members and partners, sexism, and having to raise a daughter by herself, she persevered. At first, her goal was to be a side person (guitarist) on others' records. But she also wrote songs, and she wanted to see them recorded. Thus she began to work on her singing, too. While she hasn't come to the blues in the prescribed way, her struggle, dedication, and determination seem to authenticate her, along with the fact that she has always been true to herself, respectful of her elders, and an ongoing student of the tradition. Coleman's recordings reflect a wide range of influences, including funk, jazz, soul, gospel, rock, and an array of blues styles.

For many observers, a performer's inclusion of rock elements into his or her playing conflicts with preconceived notions of blues authenticity. Critics who regard Coleman as *the* Black female electric blues guitarist have a hard time accepting her rock influences. Frank John Hadley, for example, praises Coleman's first Blind Pig CD, *I Can't Lose* (1997), for the way she "balances the reserve and control of the blues with the extreme personal involvement of soul music." He notes that her "guitar breathes fire without sacrificing musicality, and her singing packs authentic blues feeling."[43] On her next CD (*Where Blue Begins*), however, according to Hadley "she moves away from subtlety, finesse, sensitivity and creativity to join in the testosterone-driven grandstanding of the James Solberg Band." Coleman's originals, Hadley says, "would speak more clearly and eloquently in a cooler blues climate."[44] He also has a problem with her third Blind Pig CD (*Soft Place to Fall*), on which "she makes a bid for mainstream attention [throttling] her Telecaster with more musical intelligence and character than most any testosterone-jacked guitar man." Hadley also feels that "none of the [just three] originals offers insight into the life of a middle-aged African American woman trying to realize her dreams while laboring on the pitiless blues highway."[45] Actually, the subjects and themes of the CD's original songs both resonate traditional blues themes and seem plausible reflections of Coleman's life experience.[46] Ingrained notions of "authenticity," however, give Hadley the audacity to insinuate that he knows better than Coleman herself about the "true" nature of the experience of someone in her shoes. As Coleman has said, "The songs I write are true . . . I don't know any other way to write."[47]

Hadley is not the only critic who "can't take the heat." Bill Dahl finds Coleman's voice unable to adapt to the "unsubtle surroundings" of the most rock-influenced songs on *Soft Place to Fall.* Similar to Hadley's reaction to *Where Blue Begins,* Dahl feels that Coleman "was trying too hard to strut her stuff in a macho milieu."[48] Dahl finds Coleman's voice just fine, however, on her original songs, which he describes as "less aggressively electrified but [retaining] a tough resonant edge."[49] Apparently, Dahl's real problem is with the CD's rock influence (not authentic enough) and, especially, with heavy metal sounds coming from a petite African American woman. It is not Coleman's voice that is unable to adapt, however; rather, it is Dahl's expectations of her that aren't budging. While *Soft Place to Fall* (fig. 2.2) may be more reflective of Coleman's rock background than previous CDs, the range of styles it encompasses is no less wide.

The more obvious bid the CD makes for mainstream attention comes in its visual presentation. Promoters were attempting to catch the attention of potential buyers with the sexy cover photos by Marc Norberg. On the front cover is a closeup profile in black and white of Coleman from her eyebrow to just above her chin, against a black background, lips parted slightly in a serious look, braids hanging over her face, eye lashes peeking through the hair. On the back cover, also in black and white, Coleman, topless, hugs a

Fig. 2.2. The cover of Deborah Coleman's CD *Soft Place to Fall,* 2000. Blind Pig BPCD 5061. Photo by Marc Norberg. Courtesy of Blind Pig Records.

guitar to her chest. Another album cover by Norberg, the front cover of *Livin' on Love* (2001), shows Coleman lying on a bright red pillow or comforter in a plush purple zip-up shirt, lips closed in a smile, braids scattered provocatively on the red bedding, one hand clasping the guitar neck in front of her. The back cover is similar except that her shirt is open, her eyes are closed, and the guitar is gone. In reviews, critics regularly mention Coleman's good looks as an asset and often offer sexualized descriptions of her performance. One reviewer, for example, noted that the "petite Coleman swiveled her hips and tossed her braided hair as she solicited quivering notes from her guitar on several solos."[50]

What locates Coleman's blues within the tradition is the fact that she bares her soul, gives all she's got, draws her audience in, and gives them music to dance to.[51] In other words, it is the aesthetics of her performance style (total involvement, audience engagement, and integral role of dance), her energy, and her down-to-earth approach that locate Coleman's blues within the tradition. "I want people to feel something when I play," Coleman says. "I want my music to be danceable when I'm in clubs."[52] Edward Chemelewski, president of Blind Pig Records, says, "She plays with such passion and feeling. . . . If you see her perform, you see it's the real thing. Once she steps onstage, the audience is rooting for her. The audience senses she really feels it."[53] Critic Michael Paoletta concurs: "She's at her most intense and fluent when she's working for a crowd."[54] Coleman's commitment to performance and to her audience is shown in her release of a live CD, *Soul Be It!* (2002), and in her move to the Telarc label for her latest CD, *What About Love?* (2004). Of the live CD, she writes, "As far back as I can remember I have been captivated by the 'live' performance. For me, it is nothing short of mesmerizing. With this recording I hope that we have brought you a glimpse of that experience."[55] Of her choice of Telarc (known for the exceptionally clear, "natural" sound of its recordings), Coleman says, "I have a need to keep it real and to keep it live and spontaneous. That's what matters to me, and I think that's what matters most to my audience."[56]

In the last few years, Coleman has been recognized with several W. C. Handy Award (the "blues grammy") nominations, and her photo has graced the cover of two top American blues magazines, *Living Blues* and *Blues Revue*. A several-time nominee for Contemporary Blues Female Artist of the Year, in 2000 Deborah Coleman was the first woman to be nominated for Best Blues Instrumentalist—Guitar, and in 2002 she was nominated for Best Entertainer of the Year. She won the Orville H. Gibson Award from the Gibson guitar company for Best Female Blues Guitarist in 2001.

BB Queen (b. 1964)

BB Queen grew up in a large musical family in Detroit.[57] Starting first on clarinet, then tenor sax, she took up the guitar at age thirteen. The youngest of the performers discussed here, Queen's youth undoubtedly works against her claims to authenticity and contributes to her being perceived as a novelty. Like Watkins, Queen is known for her stage antics—going out into the audience and playing with her teeth, for example, and with the guitar behind her back.

BB Queen arrived on the scene in 1997 with the CD *Everybody's Favorite: Qualified and Able.* Stylistically, Queen stays more within a classic blues structure and idiom than either Lynn or Coleman and exhibits less stylistic variation than Watkins.[58] At the same time, she employs the contemporary practice of including dance mixes of three earlier songs at the end of her CD. While this reflects her youth and interest in appealing to young people, it also resonates with the integral role of dance in traditional blues culture.[59] More than the other performers, Queen's focus is on guitar soloing. While her vocals are adequate, neither her lyrics nor her vocal delivery are particularly compelling. While the CD appears to have been well received by radio DJs in different parts of the country, she has been given little coverage in the major blues magazines to date.

On her debut CD, BB Queen attempts to establish authenticity through her own testimony as well as that of her mentors, fans, and critics. In her first-person liner notes, for example, Queen tells us that she grew up in the poor, Black, blues part of Detroit, and that from an early age she hung out in the same low-life blues places that had been frequented by legendary blues performers. Queen's narrative, which includes tropes of struggle and perseverance, possibly to convey lower-class status, suggests to the reader that the musician has paid her dues. She also alludes to the sexism she encountered and challenges the gender status quo by talking back to those who tried to keep her down. "I grew up on the East Side of Detroit. The Black Bottom. Danced and sang in the juke joints and blind pigs with younger sister and dad at age 5. Probably the same places John Lee Hooker frequented. I started guitar at age 13. . . . I gigged [*sic*], got bumped, ego bruised and a few guys told me to go home and bake cookies. Well!!! BB Queen has arrived. Here I am fellas—Deal with it!! Tell everybody BB Queens [*sic*] In Town!"[60]

On the CD itself, Queen introduces herself via the classic song "Let the Good Times Roll." Like B. B. King and Louis Jordan before her, she boastfully sings herself into the blues pantheon ("Hey everybody, tell everybody, BB

Queen's in town"). On the song "Nowhere Road," the voice of her inspiration and mentor, veteran blues growler Koko Taylor, helps authenticate Queen. The two blues queens trade off lyrics while Koko provides encouragement for BB's guitar solo: "Squeeze them strings BB Queen . . . come on girlfriend . . . I know you can do it." Moreover, the title track, "Everybody's Favorite (Qualified and Able)," asserts Queen's credentials and boasts her prowess and popularity by simulating a live performance with a "crowd" chanting "BB Queen, BB Queen!"[61] Finally, on the tenth track, "Psychic Lady," a male "audience" voice "checks Queen out" and ultimately "approves" her: "They call you BB Queen? You a singer? You play that guitar too? Go on, play me a song, your bad self!"

When she takes a solo, Queen says, "Let me play it for you." And after her solo, the male voice responds, "Girl you bad—you not old enough to be playin' like that." She may be young, but apparently she also already has the endorsement of B. B. King, who, according to Queen's notes, "[accepts her] as BB Queen."

The practice of female players being subjected to extra scrutiny for approval, the phenomenon of women having to prove themselves again and again before being accepted is something that Queen, Watkins, and Coleman discuss in interviews. Queen relates, "I'd go to jam sessions with my husband and they'd invite him up no questions asked. But with me it would be, 'Are you any good? Who do you sound like? Can you play this song?' [And] before I would play they'd say, 'Why don't you go home . . . ? Aren't you married?' and after I'd play they'd say, 'That's my best friend [pointing to Queen]. I been knowin' her a long time!' Every time I pick up the guitar I have to prove myself again."[62] Coleman relates a similar experience: "There have always been female players 'allowed' in. . . . But it isn't easy and I've still got a ways to go. The guys in blues are suspicious. 'Can she really play?' 'Can she really sing?' 'Does she really feel it?' Your peers have to check you out and give their approval before you're going anywhere."[63]

Conclusion

In some ways, the situation for Black female guitarists has not changed much since Memphis Minnie and Rosetta Tharpe first plugged in. Racism, sexism, classism, colorism, ageism, and stylism (if you will) permeate the discourse of authenticity, influencing the critical reception of blues performers such that Black female electric guitarists continue to be seen as anomalies and continue to be discussed in isolation. The problem is that as long as there is just one axe-wielding Black blues woman, a sense of community and support is lacking.[64] Budding African American women guitarists need Black female role models as they need opportunities to gain experience and training. "I'm looking around and I don't see any others," Deborah Coleman says. "It's especially odd considering that in the early days the blues featured plenty of black female guitarists alongside the males. . . . It never occurred to me that I'd be the only one. . . . I'm in a very unique position that plays in my favor. At least the marketing folks think so."[65]

At the same time, the evidence also suggests that change *is* on the way. The four solo debuts and ten solo CDs produced collectively by Watkins, Lynn, Coleman, and Queen are one indication of this.[66] In addition, the Blues Education Program at the Delta Blues Museum and the Blues-in-the-Schools programs being developed around the country, along with organizations such as the Music Maker Relief Fund, are bringing opportunities, visibility, and support to Black female performers (among others), exposing young women and men (potential performers) to the blues and educating them about its history. Through education and increased visibility, attitudes about race and gender and notions of authenticity are being challenged and may be shifting.

The Black female guitarists who are performing and recording today are providing role models for the next generation. Deborah Coleman, for example, told an interviewer, "I've had women come up to me in tears, telling me how much I inspired them. It's like, girl power! You're a role model for the women, and they're very sincere about it. . . . Girls who are 14 and 15 come to my shows—they can't even get into the club—but I talk with them before the show."[67] Coleman also relates: "I've heard that there's a little black girl down in the Delta in Mississippi who's playing electric guitar. . . . They asked her who her influences were, and she said, 'I want to play like Deborah Coleman.' I thought that was very cool."[68]

Despite the tokenism that typically precludes it, occasionally more than one Black female guitarist can be seen on the same stage together. Taj Mahal tells of a show sponsored by the Music Maker Relief Fund, for example, at the end of which BB Queen and Beverly "Guitar" Watkins jammed together. Knowing the kind of antics of which Queen and Watkins are capable, let us imagine what the two must have "conjured" onstage together that night, and how they inspired women and girls in the audience (and empowered Black women in particular), and let us work to envision and enact changes that will increase the presence and visibility of axe-wielding Black women in the blues. "I'm gonna tell about a night that BB Queen and Beverly were

on stage—these young girls just went crazy—[they] flocked to the front of the stage," Taj Mahal says. "They were like, 'Oh my God! You mean you can do that!?' It was nice to see. Because in less than two generations we've completely wiped out that women can do stuff. . . . How did that happen?"[69]

Notes

1. Pete Welding, liner notes, *I Ain't No Bad Gal,* CBS Portrait Masters RJ44072, 1988.

2. Christopher C. De Santis, ed., *Langston Hughes and the Chicago Defender: Essays on Race, Politics, and Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 195–96.

3. Ken Romanowski, liner notes to *Sister Rosetta Tharpe: Complete Recorded Works 1938–1944 in Chronological Order, Volume 2, 1942–1944,* Document DOCD-5335, 1995; Barry Martyn, liner notes to *Sister Rosetta Tharpe: Live in 1960,* Southland SCD-1007, 1991.

4. Quoted in Charles Wolfe, *American Roots Music* (New York: Palm Pictures, 2001).

5. Tharpe is pictured with an electric guitar on the cover of *Sister Rosetta Tharpe: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, Volume 3, 1946–1947,* Document DOCD-5607, 1998.

6. Romanowski, liner notes to *Sister Rosetta Tharpe: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, Volume 3.*

7. Wolfe, *American Roots Music.*

8. Although not primarily associated with the blues genre or with the electric guitar, Joan Armatrading, Tracy Chapman, and Toshi Reagon are Black female composer-performers all of whom sometimes play blues, sometimes play electric guitar, and sometimes really "rock."

9. John Rusky, "Venessia Young—Singing Like a Bird," *Blues Revue* 61 (October 2000): 66–67; "Blues Girl, Way Out Front She's 16, Got a Voice that Sparkles, and She's from Clarksdale," *Commercial Appeal,* July 16, 2000.

10. Eric Feber, "New CD Shows Deborah Coleman's Time Has Come," *Virginian Pilot,* March 31, 2000, E10.

11. Maria V. Johnson, "'I Was Born to Be a Musician Too': Female Guitarists in the Blues," *Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies* 33.3 (December 2002): 214–26.

12. All too often critics have avoided serious engagement with women's creativity by focusing on their looks and/or personal life.

13. Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 34.

14. Variants of this joke can be found on hundreds of Internet sites. According to Joe Kesselman ("How to Sing the Blues," http://www.lovesong.com/people/keshlam/filk/blues.html [2006]), it was first published in essay form as "How to Sing the Blues," by Judith Podell writing as "Memphis Earline Gray," in the Washington, D.C., publication *Wordrights Magazine* (1997) and subsequently circulated without her permission on the Internet.

15. Paul and Beth Garon, *Woman with Guitar: Memphis Minnie's Blues* (New York: Da Capo, 1992), 12; Nancy Levine, "'She Plays Blues Like a Man': Gender Bending the Country Blueswomen," *Blues Revue Quarterly* 7 (Winter): 37.

16. Marcus Charles Tribbett, "'Everybody Wants to Buy My Kitty': Resistance and the Articulation of the Sexual Subject in the Blues of Memphis Minnie," *Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies* 29.1 (April 1998): 42–44.

17. Peter Aschoff, "Record Review of Barrelhouse Women, 1925–1930," *Living Blues,* September/October 1997, 100–101.

18. For a discussion of authenticity in the blues, the intolerance for the mixing of styles and its relation to racial identity politics, see Christopher Waterman, "Race Music: Bo Chatmon, 'Corrine Corrina,' and the Excluded Middle," in *Music and the Racial Imagination,* ed. Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 177–81.

19. Maria V. Johnson and Nathan J. Hill, "'The Day It Comes': Turning Up the Volume on African American Women Plugging In," presented at the Delta Blues Symposium 7, Arkansas State University, March 30, 2001.

20. Nathan Hill, "Postmodern Plasticity and Concrete Practice," unpublished MS, 6–7.

21. Sheila Whiteley, *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1997), 37–49.

22. Chris Albertson, *Bessie* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), 27, 37–38.

23. For discussions of these issues in jazz, see Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen* (New York: Pantheon, 1984) and Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: All Girl Bands in the 1940s* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000); in blues, see Johnson, "I Was Born to Be a Musician Too."

24. This was also the period of the so-called British Invasion in which White male electric guitarists from Britain (e.g., Eric Clapton) and their aggressive rock music, inspired by the blues music of Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, and others, were introduced to the American mainstream.

25. Gaye Adegbalola, interview with the author, July 10, 2002.

26. Taj Mahal, interview with Brett Bonner and Scott Barretta, *Living Blues,* March/April 2000, 35.

27. Qtd. in Curtis Ross, "Coleman's Not Singing the Blues," *Tampa Tribune,* May 19, 2000, 20

28. Bret Kofford, "Deborah Coleman: Blues with a Passion," *Blues Revue* 33 (December 1997): 30.

29. Her only time "out of business" was a brief period in the mid-1960s, after Eddie Tigner of the Ink Spots, for whom she was working, had a stroke.

30. Although she did not want to wear the nurse's cap, she acquiesced; however, she refused to wear nurse's shoes.

31. Beverly "Guitar" Watkins, quoted in liner notes, *Back in Business,* Music Maker 91007-2, 2000, 5.

32. Ibid., 9.

33. Ibid., 6.

34. Peter Cooper, liner notes, Beverly "Guitar" Watkins, *Back in Business,* Music Maker 91007-2, 2000, 4.

35. Lillian Miller, "You Just Can't Keep a Good Woman Down," *Country Girls, 1926–29,* Matchbox Bluesmaster Series MSE 216, 1984.

36. John Nova Lomax, liner notes to *Barbara Lynn Hot Night Tonight,* Antone's TMG-ANT 0047, 2000.

37. Ibid.

38. Tony Mathews, liner notes, *Barbara Lynn So Good,* Rounder Bullseye Blues CD BB 9540, 1994.

39. Gibson is a well-respected and coveted brand that not many aspiring blues players could afford.

40. Mathews, liner notes, *Barbara Lynn So Good.* And here, on Lynn's guitar debut, her solo work is prominent only on her cover of B. B. King's "Sweet Sixteen."

41. Bill Dahl, "Barbara Lynn: Still a Good Thing," *Living Blues,* November/December 1999, 34.

42. In New Orleans from 1724 to 1861, the French occupied a privileged class, Blacks were slaves, and mixed-race Creoles made up a free middle class. Families of Creoles can be found today throughout southwestern Louisiana and along the Gulf Coast.

43. Frank John Hadley, review of *I Can't Lose, Down Beat* 64.6 (June 1997): 62.

44. Frank John Hadley, review of *Where Blue Begins, Down Beat* 65.12 (December 1998): 92.

45. Frank John Hadley, review of *Soft Place to Fall, Down Beat* 67.7 (July 2000): 74.

46. The title cut, "Soft Place to Fall," is about what it feels like being on the road all the time with a hectic touring schedule ("I can hardly catch my breath . . . caught in this whirlwind life"); "Another Hoping Fool" is about a woman who has been left by a lover but keeps hoping it is not true; "What Goes Around" is about a woman with "a lover on the side" who "lost the cake and the cookies too when everything crumbled away."

47. Katie Johnston, "A Woman's Best Friend: Guitar Becomes Constant Companion for Deborah Coleman," *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph,* November 20, 1998.

48. Bill Dahl, review of *Soft Place to Fall, Living Blues,* May/June 2000, 56.

49. Ibid.

50. "Always Hot, Heatwave Goes for Edgy Series," *St. Petersburg Times,* May 22, 2000.

51. This is true of all the artists discussed here. All are consummate live performers committed to a high level of audience engagement.

52. Kofford, "Deborah Coleman," 30.

53. Ibid.

54. Michael Paoletta, review of *Soul Be It! Billboard* 114.43 (December 26, 2002): 19.

55. Liner notes, *Soul Be It!* Blind Pig BPCD 5079, 2002.

56. Liner notes, *What About Love?* Telarc Blues CD-83595, 2004.

57. There are no specific references to age or birth date in the scant information I have found on Queen. In her liner notes she says that she started guitar at thirteen, and a 2002 article states that she has been playing for twenty-five years. She also has a teenage daughter and another daughter, who died at age ten, to whom her CD is dedicated.

58. All songs employ the standard twelve-bar blues structure, except for "Movin' and Shakin'," which is harmonically static with a funky groove. The latter structure is traditionally found in the rural blues of northern Mississippi and in the urban blues of John Lee Hooker.

59. See Tera W. Hunter's discussion of working-class Black women and public dancing in dance halls around the turn of the century in "'Sexual Pantomimes': The Blues Aesthetic, and Black Women in the New South," in *Music and the Racial Imagination,* ed. Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 145–64.

60. BB Queen, liner notes, *Everybody's Favorite: Qualified and Able,* Mystic Blue Label MCDT 1001, 1997.

61. The boastful proclamation of one's skills and assertion of one's place in the tradition is also a strategy used by female hip-hop artists. I think, for example, of Queen Latifah's "Come into My House" and Salt-N-Pepa's "Expression."

62. Marissa Winegar, "B. B. Queen: Meet the Newest Blues Monarch," *Carbondale Nightlife,* September 27, 2002.

63. Rebecca Coudret, "Singing the Blues: They're Changing, Says Deborah Coleman, Who Plays Them, Sings Them, and Writes Them," *Evansville Courier and Press,* June 17, 1999, C1.

64. I use "axe-wielding Black blues woman" as an alternative to the often-used "African American female electric guitarist." The phrase is meant to connote powerful electric guitarists, evoking the metaphoric lingo of performers, which is sometimes taken up by critics. A performer "wood sheds" (practices and practices) on their axe (musical instrument) to become proficient (in other words, a formidable soloist).

65. Marty Jones, "Crashing the Glass Ceiling," *Westword,* June 28, 2001.

66. In addition, Lynn and Watkins have each had a new CD become available while this book has been in press.

67. Ed Ivey, "Deborah Coleman Can't Lose the Blues," *Blues Revue* 53 (December 1999): 9.

68. Jones, "Crashing the Glass Ceiling." The girl to which Coleman refers is probably Venessia Young.

69. Taj Mahal interview, 39.