

Magnificent triplets The making of Memphis Minnie's *I'm talking about you*

by Daniel Droixhe

Since Memphis Minnie's first vocal appearance on record with *Goin' back to Texas*, cut for Columbia in June 1929, the duet she formed with Kansas Joe McCoy



Memphis Minnie (1930's publicity photo)

favoured a guitar lick that can be roughly characterized as a three notes run going from the fifth to the seventh of the scale. This very simple "finger habit" was used, sometimes discreetly, in various ways. We shall here consider the first occurrences. We relied upon three very useful sources: the edition of *Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe McCoy recordings in chronological order* on Document (DOCD - 5028 - 31), the transcriptions of the songs by R.R. Macleod (*Document Blues - 1*, Edinburgh: PAT Publications, 1994, p. 251-300) and the excellent book devoted to Minnie by Paul and Beth Garon (*Woman with guitar*, New York: Da Capo, 1992).

In *Goin' back to Texas*, performed in the key of A, the pattern is repeated over the first four bars and gives the piece its uptempo (n° 3 on Document, vol. 1). The lick is then applied for two measures to the IV chord (which

means that the lick is played from the dominant to C). A too mechanical rhythmic accent is avoided by Minnie's singing freely "surfing" over the beat, in response to Kansas Joe's mournful spoken part. Let us note some confusion, by the end, in the harmonic structure: was the pair, carried from a Beale Street barber shop (according to Mike Leadbitter) and/or a North Memphis open house (according to Johnny Shines) to New York, a little bit nervous for their first recording?

The couple will cut a remake of the song, one year later on, under the title of *I'm going back home* (Doc. 1, n° 16). Beginning as a slower rendition quickly accelerated, this version offers less convincing vocals by a stumbling Kansas Joe (in the fourth stanza), but shows a tasty combination between the bass guitar part, whose A-C two-beat lick is falling upon the triplet, and ornaments played on higher strings. So, it is time for a not-so-easy question. Who, in the couple, is playing what? Following the tradition, confirmed by Minnie's recordings without Joe or with Ernest Lawlars, we believe that these "solo" parts and especially the "magnificent triplet" are hers. Anyway, *I'm going back home* definitely got what has been praised about Minnie's and Joe's artistry: one of the most "intricate two guitar style of Memphis", with a "fast-paced, highly rhythmic but delicately articulated sound", possibly "reverberating" from the Beale Street Sheiks (Frank Stokes and Dan Sane)¹.

Paul and Beth Garon remark that one of the team's most successful releases, *I'm talking about you*, especially the version n° 2, is thematically "a descendant of *Going back to Texas/I'm going back home*", due to its acrid lyrics dealing "with a woman's unhappiness at her man's behavior". The affiliation also lies in the use of the sacred triplet.

We can here consider as intermediary links, or steps, two songs recorded at the beginning of the pair's second session, held for Vocalion in February 1930. *She wouldn't give me none* and *I'm gonna bake my biscuits* were cut on the 20th, *I'm talking about you* the day after (Doc. 1, respectively n° 9, 7 & 12). The introductive and instrumental couplets of *She wouldn't give me none*, performed in C sharp, use the pattern on the first eight bars in the same way as *Going back to Texas*, with eventual developments on the

triplet reaching the seventh, as in the last stanza, where is added some "rolling" around the B¹.

I'm gonna bake my biscuits looks closer to *I'm talking about you*. The structure is ready: a rather declamatory first part (four bars) followed by a burden whose lyrics are stressed symmetrically by the repetition of the triplets. It has been written that this type of song, about food and cooking, is dealing with "one of the most significant and strategically important registers through which the meaning of (Minnie's) songs is transmitted"². One can consider that those culinary references "accomplish unity through their content and elaboration and richness through their metaphor" - the homogeneity of the piece resting upon the composer's virtuosity in suggesting sexual equivalencies. From that point of view, we must recognize that *I'm gonna bake my biscuit* is not absolutely successful. Paul and Beth Garon observe "enticing ambiguities and contradictions" in the song.

"Does *ain't gonna give nobody none* mean *I'm keeping them for myself* or *They're no free*? And what does *free* mean? *You got to stay all night* or some other form of exchange? Further, we are immediately struck by the tension between biscuit-baking as a solitary, creative activity for which no man is required (*I'm gonna lock my door, nail my windows all down*) and the erotic implications of a sexual partner (*if you want my bread, you got to stay all night*)".

Let us add that the desired unity is more or less broken when the verses "I ain't got no flour / and ain't got no meal" induces a lament upon the situation of a woman with "no man", pushed to "rob and steal". The sexual appeal dissolves in an atmosphere of disappointment and quarrel.

*Ain't no need of you getting mad now, and
poking out your mouth .
You ain't gonna give me no bread
when my bread runs out...*

From the same point of view, *I'm talking about you* offers more coherent lyrics and the power of a straight and dramatic protest, versus metaphoric play. The versions of this song, according to Garon's book, "show up with some frequency on the collector's market", "their worn and scratched appearance" attesting "their popularity with their former owners". This popularity is also due to the fact that it was released by Vocalion as the reverse of *Bumble bee*, a signature hokum song for the duet. *I'm talking about you* n° 2 was recorded during the summer and backed *Bumble bee* n° 2, or was coupled with n° 1 on cheaper labels sold in stores³. The triplet is here restricted to the burden, alternating with the lyrics "I'm talking about you" in a symmetry which gives to the song most of its character. No use to emphasize the beautiful cool-rolling tempo achieved, in the first version, by the rhythm guitar, played in C sharp with the fingers in a C position (it would mean at the fourth fret for an instrument in standard tuning, but Minnie's guitar could not be tuned at concert pitch). In contrast with the repetitive refrain, Minnie's vocals throw panting recriminations at a man who led her "near to bust" by walking around "just struttin' (his) stuff". Even the reducing of the triplet in the last stanza, following a lace of solo notes, adds to the balance of the piece. The second version is "delivered at nearly twice the pace", and one may appreciate "its striking energy level and compelling guitar virtuosity" (Garon) - the swinging appeal of the first version being a little bit outshined by the hasty tempo...

The triplet pattern can be noticed elsewhere in Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe's first recordings. *When the levee breaks* has it (Doc. 1, n° 5; second instrumental stanza). But it is significant that the lick disappears, as soon as June 1930, in a piece pertaining to the *Talkin' about you* family such as *I'm wild about my stuff* (Doc. 1, n° 23). The pair's technical ability, already displayed in the imaginative intro of *What fault you find of me?*, cut at the same time, was increasing and allowed fresh themes, schemes and variations. The duet reached a new summit when it recorded in May *Don't want no woman*, an unequalled combination of sliding bass, guitar riffs in unison with the vocals, and solo embellishments delivered with the deepest tone through the clearest recording. Which type of guitar was used will probably remain unknown.

(To be continued)



Memphis Minnie (1930's publicity photo)

- (1) Garon, p. 245.
- (2) It is the place for me to stress that, being no musicologist, I try to express in my own words what I hear, with many deceiving approximations.
- (3) Garon, p. 191 ff.