Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 54
Memphis Minnie

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: It's the Dead Ladies Show Podcast!

The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women — both overlooked and iconic — who achieved amazing things against all odds while they were alive. And we do it through women's history storytelling on stage - here in Berlin and beyond… And then we bring you the very best of those stories here on the podcast. I'm Susan Stone, and I am joined once again by Dead Ladies Show co-founder, Katy Derbyshire. Hey there!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Hi, Susan!

SUSAN STONE: Katy, it feels like a busy time for the Dead Ladies Show, even as here in Berlin we're going on a short summer break.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: It does, doesn't it? We just had a show here in Berlin at ACUD, and this coming weekend we're heading to Muenster, in West Germany, for a show at the Center for Literature. And we're getting ready for a show in July at the Podfest Berlin, on the 16th and 17th of July. So I'm going to be there talking about writer Irmgard Keun – in German.

SUSAN STONE: *Jawohl*.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Podcast listeners will know all about her, in English. And you, Susan, will be talking about a very different writer.

SUSAN STONE: Yes! It's going to be gothic page-turner queen, Virginia Andrews, better known as V.C. Andrews, [WHISPERS] of *Flowers in the Attic* fame.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: [WHISPERS] Yes, just whisper that *very quietly*.

SUSAN STONE: Shh, don't let your mom know. But, you know, we also have a show in New York — DLS NYC — and it's back! It's in the KGB Bar's Red Room curated and hosted by our friend, Molly O'Laughlin Kemper.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: That's the one, yes! Neither you nor I have yet attended the New York Show, anyway — but our dear floral-loving co-founder, Florian Duijsens, was there

for its triumphant return last month, and he even graced the stage. So we're going to hear from him all the way in New York in this very episode.

SUSAN STONE: We are! But first, let's start with a question… Katy, what do Beyoncé, Björk, Sophie B. Hawkins and Led Zeppelin have in common?

KATY DERBYSHIRE: They don't all have a "B" in their name, you're gonna have to tell me.

SUSAN STONE: It was close, though! The answer is, of course, our featured Dead Lady.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Ahh. Here's Florian from New York's Red Room to tell us all about Memphis Minnie.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Beyoncé's "Don't Hurt Yourself," Björk's "Army of Me," and bisexual icon Sophie B. Hawkins's "Damn, Wish I was Your Lover" all sample a gargantuan John Bonham beat from "When the Levee Breaks," a classic Led Zeppelin recording from 1971. So in the grand old tradition of rock and roll, however, this was a cover, originally performed by Black artists who were then billed as Kansas Joe and Memphis Minnie. Sadly, neither of these two would live to hear their work resonating throughout late 20th and early 21st-century music.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Yet Memphis Minnie was America's most popular female blues singer in the 1930s and 40s, aside from Bessie Smith – who you might have heard of, but she also did a lot of jazz, I guess, traditionally. So, in fact, Minnie was far more popular than Robert Johnson, Charley Patton, or Lightnin' Hopkins – who, um, white men like me like to talk about a lot [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]. Minnie wrote a lot of her own songs, she played lead guitar, she released more solo records than her male partners. (And a side note: in the 40s, because of the material shortages, a lot of the records were melted down. So a lot of Lightnin' Hopkins records were actually *made* of Minnies' records.)

Anyway, so, though Minnie recorded around 220 sides, not a great deal of her life is documented, and there is no birth certificate for any of her *four* different possible dates of birth. Most likely she was born near Walls, Mississippi, in 1897 [SHOWS SLIDE]. Her name was Lizzie Douglas, but her family called her Kid. [SHOWS SLIDE] She was the eldest of 13 siblings, four of whom died young. Her father was a sharecropper, growing sugarcane, corn, cotton, and the like. [SHOWS SLIDE] Kid never took to farming though, and also never finished school, though she did know how to read and write.

[SHOWS SLIDE] By all accounts she was a bit of a wild child, often running away, right along this road to Memphis, particularly to Beale Street [SHOWS SLIDE], where she got

so obsessed with music that eventually her parents gave her her first guitar at the age of eight. Soon after, she literally ran away with the circus [AUDIENCE LAUGHS], joining the Ringling brothers on a tour of the American South. Here she is singing about her youth:

[PLAYS RECORDING OF MEMPHIS MINNIE SONG, “IN MY GIRLISH DAYS”]

> I flagged a train, didn't have a dime
> Trying to run away from that home of mine
> I didn't know no better
> Oh boys
> In my girlish days

In her song “In My Girlish Days,” she explains “I had to travel ‘fore I got wise,” and she was certainly streetwise. As one friend said: “Any men fool with her, she’d go for them right away. She didn’t take no foolishness off them. Guitar, pocketknife, pistol, anything she get her hand on, she’d use it.”

[SHOWS SLIDE] After WWI, when she’d just turned 20, we find her just down the road from Walls (again), living with her first musical partner, Willie Brown. “Wasn’t nothing he could teach her. Everything Willie could play, she could play, and then she could play things he couldn’t,” a friend later said. With him she’d play all over the place, including white people’s parties, but she never sat still very long. And by the late 1920s she was outta there, setting up shop with Joe McCoy [SHOWS SLIDE], with whom she’d record some of her most enduring songs, like “When the Levee Breaks.” Playing for dimes at a Beale Street barbershop, they were discovered by a record scout. They first went to New York to record in 1929 [SHOWS SLIDE], and in 1930, on the day of their first session for another label, they got married [SHOWS SLIDE].

It was probably a white record label exec who named them Kansas Joe and Memphis Minnie, even though Joe wasn’t from Kansas, Minnie wasn’t from Memphis, and Minnie wasn’t her real name. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Joe was no slouch in the songwriting department either. So, he had written “Why Don’t You Do Right?,” which you might know. Wildly “popularized” by Peggy Lee in 1942, the song was originally recorded by the Black singer Lil Green the year before. [SHOWS SLIDE] Like Green, Minnie was never paid as much as Peggy Lee though. Instead, she earned as much as her male Black colleagues, $12.50 per song in her early career (that’s about 250 in today’s dollars). By 1946, she would’ve “proven” her value and was making $35 (or $520) a pop.

Billboard magazine wrote that she did especially well on jukeboxes, where she was said to make “coin machine magic at the Harlem spots.” [SHOWS SLIDE] So-called

race records like hers were sold all over the place: at furniture stores, at plantation commissaries, or via mail order. By 1927, which was just before she started recording, 10 million race records were sold a year, and though only 10–20% of Black households actually had record players, many more had records. And 80% of the blues-record buyers were actually women, and Minnie was very popular.

[SHOWS SLIDE] By 1935, it was so very clear that Minnie was the star, not Joe, so their credits were actually switched. It became “Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe” instead, and Minnie started recording more and more solo material, and also some saltier stuff [SHOWS SLIDE], like “Dirty Mother For You” [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] and also “Bumble Bee Blues” (about her man’s excellent “stinging” skills). [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Off the mic, Minnie cursed like a sailor too. Big Bill Broonzy [SHOWS SLIDE] confirmed that she was unlike other women: “There was another woman going around Chicago saying she was Memphis Minnie. But when I saw her, I said: ‘Hell, no, that's not Memphis Minnie, [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] because the real Memphis Minnie can pick a guitar and sing as good as any man I've ever heard. This woman plays like a *woman* guitar player.’” [AUDIENCE BOOS]

And according to her friend (and sometime lover) Homesick James – [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] (this is just one in a series of amazingly named partners) – it wasn’t just cursing and playing guitar and gambling, she also drank “like a man.” [SHOWS SLIDE] Here’s one of her favorite brands of wine, Wild Irish Rose. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] And she chewed tobacco. “She kept it in her mouth all the time. Even when she was singing, she kept that tobacco in her mouth. She had a coffee cup, be singing, spit right in there […] she didn’t care.” [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

[SHOWS SLIDE] Her sense of style stood out too, wearing nice dresses and high-heeled shoes, occasional glasses (as I maybe said), and sometimes even pricey wigs. Here’s a friend’s anecdote: “Minnie paid $200 for a wig. At that time women wasn’t wearing wigs, you know, unless they just had to. She paid $200 for a wig, she got drunk and went home that night, leave that wig on a chair. Now, someone had done got her a little puppy. She woke up the next morning looking for her wig, her wig was tore up and scattered all over the house! Minnie hit the puppy with her guitar, [AUDIENCE MOANS], broke the neck off of it” – the guitar, I presume [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] – “and [her husband] let him out, and he said that dog didn’t even look back. That dog did not come back at all.” [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Minnie was also very particular about her jewelry story [SHOWS SLIDE], so to speak, her smile sparkling with gold teeth, wearing a bracelet – as you can see there – made from a silver dollar from her birth year that her sister had given her. A friend noted that

she also had a set of earrings made out of two silver dimes. Money was kind of her trademark. Her guitars were a point of pride, too, and she was one of the very first blues artists to use an *electric* guitar, playing Chicago venues billed as “Memphis Minnie and her electric guitar” or “master of electric guitar”.

Some sources suggest her marriage to Kansas Joe broke up because he was jealous of her stardom, but Minnie certainly seems to have initiated the break. Here’s a clip from a song she recorded right around that time in 1937:

[PLAYS RECORDING OF MEMPHIS MINNIE SONG, “HOT STUFF”]

> I decided I wouldn’t marry no more
> Now I’m catching hell everywhere I go
> Hot stuff, hot stuff
> Well it’s hot stuff here and it’s everywhere I go

Minnie was a slim, not particularly tall woman with a sharp tongue and an even sharper wardrobe: "They had to fight the mens away from her,” as her sister said. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] She is rumored to have dated men with wonderful names like Fiddlin’ Joe Martin [SHOWS SLIDE] (here he is on the left, many years later), and Blind John Davis [SHOWS SLIDE] [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] (also much later) – not to mention a man called Squirrel, of whom I could find no pictures. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

[SHOWS SLIDE] In 1938, however, she met Ernest Lawlars, soon to be her new musical partner and second husband, “Little Son Joe.” Her friend said: “She was very faithful to him, you know she never did get carried away, ‘bout her husbands.” He, however, would have to live in her shadow, as evidenced by the name on his record label [SHOWS SLIDE]: Mr. Memphis Minnie. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Now, like millions of other Black people, the two of them headed north, moving to Chicago’s south side in 1939, and marrying in 1942, here [SHOWS SLIDE] on Clark Street. Minnie spent a great deal of time on the road though, touring all over in her 1938 Ford. [SHOWS SLIDE] [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

“Child,” Minnie would say, “I been all over the world, New York, Chicago, California.” Adding, “I drink *anywhere* I please” – which, in the Chicago years, mostly meant gin. Still, there were limits: on one of these tours, near DC for instance, they all had to sleep in a field, because the motels didn’t rent rooms to Black people, nor were they allowed to eat or drink with the white acts.

She used the Ford until it quit, and never was able to buy another car. She never learned how to drive it either, and in 1941 perhaps this is what inspired her to write and

record what would become her biggest hit: “Me & My Chauffeur.” [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Here’s a clip from a later recording:

[PLAYS RECORDING OF MEMPHIS MINNIE SONG, “Me & My Chauffeur”]

> Won't you be my chauffeur
> Won't you be my chauffeur
> I wants him to drive me
> I wants him to drive me downtown
> ‘Cause he drives so easy, I can't turn him down

Despite what its lyrics about shooting her chauffeur may suggest [AUDIENCE LAUGHS], Minnie always told her very religious sister she was also a believer. Quote: “Only every time she would get ready to get baptized, she couldn’t resist going to play at a nightclub” instead. And in the 1940s, Minnie was basically at the club non-stop, performing and partying at places like Chicago’s Club DeLisa [SHOWS SLIDE], the Dipsy Doodle Lounge, and at the legendary gay nightclub Joe’s Deluxe. Ebony magazine did this wonderful story about their drag shows. One song I imagine she’d play at drag shows, originally recorded in 1930, was “Plymouth Rock Blues”, in which she sings: “I got so many chickens, can’t tell my roosters from my hens.” [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

To get a better sense of just what a Memphis Minnie show looked and sounded like, we’ll have to turn to Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, who saw her at Chicago’s 230 Club [SHOWS SLIDE] on New Year’s Eve 1942. No video of Minnie exists, but I hope this long quote gives you a sense of her magnetism [SHOWS SLIDE]:

“Memphis Minnie sits on top of the icebox at the 230 Club in Chicago and beats out blues on an electric guitar. […] Minnie sings through a microphone and her voice—hard and strong anyhow for a little woman’s—is made harder and stronger […] The singing, the electric guitar, and the drums are so hard and so loud, amplified as they are by General Electric on top of the icebox, that sometimes the voice, the words, and the melody get lost under their noise, leaving only the rhythm to come through clear. The rhythm fills the 230 Club with a deep and dusky heartbeat that overrides all modern amplification. The rhythm is as old as Memphis Minnie’s most remote ancestor.

Memphis Minnie’s feet in her high-heeled shoes keep time to the music of her electric guitar. Her thin legs move like musical pistons. She is a slender, light-brown woman who looks like an old-maid school teacher with a sly sense of humor. […] Before she plays, she cocks her head on one side like a bird, glances from her place on the box to the crowded bar below, frowns quizzically, and looks more than ever like a colored lady

teacher in a neat Southern school about to say, ‘Children, the lesson is on Page 14, Paragraph 2.’

But Memphis Minnie says nothing of the sort. Instead she grabs the microphone and yells, “Hey, now!” Then she hits a few deep chords at random, leans forward ever so slightly over her guitar, bows her head, and begins to beat out a good old steady down-home rhythm on the strings—a rhythm so contagious that often it makes the crowd holler out loud.

Then Minnie smiles. Her gold teeth flash for a split second. Her earrings tremble. Her left hand with dark red nails moves up and down the strings of the guitar’s neck. Her right hand with the dice ring on it picks out the tune, throbs out the rhythm, beats out the blues.” [AUDIENCE MEMBER WHISTLES]

Langston Hughes.

Her music did rock harder than most of her contemporaries, this we know from a story Big Bill Broonzy tells in his memoir [SHOWS SLIDE] about one of the many blues battles he and Minnie played. The club was packed, there was an open bar. It was 1:30 in the morning, both Bill and Minnie were plenty sauced, and the judges signaled they would start: Bill played *his* two songs, and then Minnie took the stage after him, starting with a 20-minute version of *Me And My Chauffeur*. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Afterwards, the judges were unanimous. Bill writes: “They went to the stand, picked Minnie up and carried her around in the hall until her husband saw them, got up and told them: ‘Put her down, she can walk.’ [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] He was jealous of any man.” She’d also battle Muddy Waters: “She would get it *every time.* Muddy just couldn’t do nothing with Memphis, no, nuh-uh, not back then.” A witness confirms: “I saw her beat 10 different artists one night.”

In the late 1940s, Minnie and Son were living in a two-room apartment [SHOWS SLIDE], and she continued playing Chicago venues throughout the early 50s, among them Tiny and Ruby's Gay Spot, a lesbian bar run by Tiny Davis. She was a trumpet player with the all-female International Sweethearts of Rhythm [SHOWS SLIDE] (this was their saxophone section), a group made up of women with Latina, Asian, white, Black, Indian, and Puerto Rican backgrounds. [AUDIENCE CHEERS] They’re amazing. There’s a whole documentary about them on YouTube. They have a track called “Diggin’ Dykes.” [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] I mean, who doesn’t?

[SHOWS SLIDE] By 1958, there was an expressway where the Gay Spot used to be, and Minnie’s career was also foundering. One blues fan found her playing music between the acts at strip joints. And though reports on this aspect of her life are

naturally shady, it's very probable Minnie also supplemented her unreliable musician's income through sex work, especially in the early years of her career.

[SHOWS SLIDE] In the late 50s, she'd visit her sister-in-law in Memphis more and more often, ultimately moving back south because of Son's health. But doctors were expensive, and Minnie's precious guitars were in and out of pawnshops. They didn't have a TV or record player, lived off welfare. She drank whiskey, they made a home brew from yeast cakes and potatoes. In 1960, she had a stroke and ended up in a wheelchair. Son died the year after, and Minnie lived her final years at her sister-in-law's and then at a nursing home [SHOWS SLIDE].

By this point she could no longer play guitar, but the blues was being "re-discovered," and people like Bonnie Raitt were trying to track her down. Benefits were held as far away as the UK to support her. She died on August 6, 1973, aged 76, and is buried at the Walls cemetery. Twenty-three years later she received this gravestone [SHOWS SLIDE], paid for by Bonnie Raitt.

[SHOWS SLIDE] There is one biography of hers, *Woman with Guitar: Memphis Minnie's Blues*, by Paul & Beth Garon, first published just after her death, and expanded in 2014. But I wish she'd had the chance to tell her own story, as most short pieces online describe her as a talented monster who abused men for no reason [AUDIENCE LAUGHS], like she *wasn't* making her way through an extremely masculine space, threatened by racism and violence at every turn, from police brutality, to domestic abuse and exploitation.

We end up having to rely on the stories of jealous men like Muddy Waters, stories that ultimately reveal more about them and their insecurities. Muddy Waters said: "She was a great girl, but she was a woman. […] You know, when a woman's out there doing the job, [and] you're doing the job she's doing, it could get a little evil sometimes. She don't have the strong mind like the man because she can get *flustrated* and can fly off the handle, and that's the only thing that's wrong with her—she would get a little evil sometimes."

Jimmy Rogers remembers one night they were at the 708 Club, which was here [SHOWS SLIDE]. Well, I'll let Jimmy tell the rest of the story.

[PLAYS RECORDING OF JIMMY ROGERS SPEAKING OVER MUSIC]

"She, uh, came in from some place she'd been playing. Son Joe over in the booth where we were. There was a few ladies standin' around there. She came over where we were sittin' at and – she picked his glass up, I thought she was gonna drink it – she

picked the glass up and dashed the whiskey in his face, man. Hell [...] That was the roughest I've seen her, but they say she can get rougher than that."

Johnny Shines claims she could get rougher still:

"They tell me she shot one old man's arms off, down in Mississippi. Shot his arm off, or cut it off with a hatchet, something. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Some say shot, some say cut. Minnie was a hellraiser, I know that. A lot of things they say she did in the past, I believe it. She'd work Son Joe over right on the bandstand, right in front of the whole audience. Bang, bop, boom, bop."

Now, I don't want to minimize any abuse Minnie may have inflicted on men (or puppies), but to me, she sounds like a woman who fought back, who resisted a system that was set up to exploit women like her and appropriate their work. I'd like to remember her like this instead [SHOWS SLIDE], looking confidently into the camera in a white ball gown, holding her guitar. See that silver-dollar bracelet again? And with a song she recorded in 1946 called "Hold Me Blues," in which she sings: "The judge said, 'Minnie, how come you mistreat your man?' I said, 'Judge, you know you ain't a woman, and you sure can't understand.'" And it may be a blues track, and we may think of that as doomy or gloomy or, I don't know, mopey. But it's so full of joy! In fact, in that same song, she also emphasizes: "Cause I lived the life I loved, and I love the life I lived." She recorded 10 different takes of this song, each with different guitar solos and ad libs, but I like take seven best.

[PLAYS RECORDING OF MEMPHIS MINNIE SONG "HOLD ME BLUES"]

Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Florian Duijsens on Memphis Minnie, recorded by Jennifer Nulsen at the Red Room in New York's KGB Bar. And if you want to hear all of those songs that Florian mentioned from Minnie –

SUSAN STONE: And others!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: We have a playlist prepared – and others, exactly! – We have a playlist prepared to bring the blues to your ears. You can find it, along with some of those wonderful photos of Minnie and other info, over on our episode page at deadladiesshow.com/podcast

SUSAN STONE: And we'll also share some of those links and pictures and songs on our social media accounts, @deadladiesshow, and that's also where you can get information on advance tickets to our events, and you can let us know also which Dead Ladies you would like to hear about next.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: If you would like to *read* our show, or you know someone who would, we have transcripts! I just recently met our transcriptionista, Annie Musgrove, and you can find her hard work on the show episode pages on our website. Our archive podcast project is funded by you lovely listeners who give generously on our Patreon page, which you can find at patreon.com/deadladiesshowpodcast. All one word.

SUSAN STONE: Indeed. Thank you to Katy, thank you to Florian, to Molly and Jenn in New York and all the lovely people who came out to see their show at the Red Room, under the auspices of the fabulous Lori Schwarz.

The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced, and edited by me, Susan Stone.

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Our theme tune is 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon. Thanks to everybody out there listening. We'll be back again next month with another fabulous Dead Lady!

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