

Farewell Rosa Henderson By Derrick Stewart-Baxter

In the past twelve months besides the passing of many great jazz musicians, plus the deaths of Little Walter Jacobs and J. B. Lenoir at a far too early age (poor J. B. just made 38 when he was killed in a car accident on April 29th, 1967), the blues world has lost two of its most beloved women artists. That both Ida Cox and Rosa Henderson had been inactive for some years, by no means softens the blow, nor dulls the sense of inevitability of life and death. Fortunately, most creative artists (and this includes jazz musicians) do lead full lives. However hard pressed they may be once in a while when conditions are right and they are blowing up a storm, they reach the heights and achieve the peak of enjoyment. Even poor, tortured Bird did at times, if one can judge by some of his great records. Billie Holiday too, right up until the end, had her moments of creative ecstasy. It is when one reads yet another obituary that the lyrics Joe Turner sings come vividly to life:

You're so beautiful, but you've got to die someday.

You will read little about the female blues vaudeville artists in the blues magazines except for the odd reference to Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey. The young men who run these publications work extraordinarily hard with dedicated enthusiasm, but very naturally, they concentrate on the styles and artists that interest them. I do not blame them for this. Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that this important side of jazz and blues has been neglected. I do not think that many people realise just how important this era was. It was from the music hall, the travelling show and the Negro circuits, such as T.O.B.A. that many of our jazz musicians sprang. What a wealth of talent started in this way. Once you can accept the vaudeville style (and even Bessie Smith showed what she owed to vaudeville), you find yourself in a fascinating world of song and instrumental music. Some of the songs with their amusing titles, very blues based, have gone into the melting pot and influenced our music quite considerably.

Rosa Henderson and Ida Cox, were two great performers. The latter is looked upon as one of the classic blues singers, whilst Rosa, a blues, vaudeville and cabaret artist, was one of the most popular singers of her day.

Rosa's death came as a great shock to me for my wife and I visited her in 1966. It was not a very happy occasion. A dull, cheerless mid-May day with the rather seedy Harlem street looking grey and sombre in the fine drizzle that was falling. We made our way gingerly up the dark stairway. The door to her apartment was opened by a lady (I never did find out her exact relationship to Rosa, but I think it was her daughter-in-law). 'She's very sick, but I am sure she would like to see you—it's been so long since anyone remembered her or her records, and when she knows that you've come all the way from England, she'll be thrilled; it is sure to cheer her up—and that's what she needs more than anything else. She's so very low in spirit', the woman said. We were ushered in to a large, gloomy, but scrupulously clean bedroom, and there lying on a bed in a dark corner, was a frail old lady, obviously very ill indeed. At our entry, her eyes opened, and when she saw Victoria Spivey, who had brought us to Rosa's home, a suggestion of a smile appeared on her care-worn face, but it was only a hint, a rather pathetic effort. The next half hour was a painful experience. The once famous singer was very touched by our presence. She just could not get over the fact that we had come all the way from Great Britain and that we remembered and loved

her records. When we took our leave, she had cheered up considerably. I did not tax her with questions, questions I longed to ask, for here was a slice of history, but I was sure she was too ill. The real trouble with Rosa was that she lacked the will to live or fight her illness. She was a heartbroken woman, the death of her husband, and a personal problem involving a dearly loved relative, had taken their toll. She was a shattered old lady when we saw her, yet Leonard Kunstadt assured us that only a few months previously, she was still capable of singing extremely well. Now we knew that the end of the road was in sight for poor Rosa Henderson.

The young Worthing collector and blues enthusiast, Bill Daynes Wood, has made a study of these early women singers, and is particularly fond of Rosa's work. I have therefore asked him to write a few lines on this remarkable artist. This is what he has to say:

'Born in 1896, Rosa Henderson was one of the most outstanding of the many early women vaudeville-blues singers to record for the race record companies in the early Twenties. 'Her recording career covered the span of nine years, from the first for Victor in 1923 to the last for Columbia in 1931. During these years her name appeared on a variety of record labels including Vocalion, Paramount, Ajax and Edison. Also nearly a hundred titles appeared under her name and such pseudonyms as Josephine Thomas, Sarah Johnson and Mamie Harris. 'Her voice was strong, but at the same time possessed a sweet tone. The material she recorded varied from typical vaudeville numbers as *He May Be Your Dog, But He's Wearing My Collar*, and *Hey, Hey, and He, He, I'm Charles ton Crazy* to blues like *Penitentiary Bound Blues* and *Back Wood Blues*. Also many of her accompanists were of no mean status, including the complete Fletcher Henderson band, and such names as Coleman Hawkins, Charlie Green, Louis Metcalf, James P. Johnson, and countless others . 'Proof of her popularity with the record buying public was made clear by the number of titles released, and the only reason her recording career was cut short was the death of her husband Slim. Slim's death left Rosa heart broken, and she retired from show business altogether.

'Unfortunately Rosa Henderson has not been covered extensively in reissue programmes (except for the six LP set of Fletcher Henderson on Audubon which was only available by subscription). Only nine titles, to the best of my knowledge have been issued, all of which I believe are still available. They are as follows:— Jazz Collector EP JEL 14, *Daddy Come Back; I've Got Somebody Now*. Historical Jazz LP 13. ***Back Woods Blues***; *Four Flushin' Papa*. Historical Jazz LP 14. *Strut Your Puddy; Some body's Doing What You Wouldn't Do; Papa If You Can't Do Better; I'm Saving It All For You*. Historical Jazz LP 15. *Get It Fixed*. 'Rosa Henderson is certainly one of my favourite blues singers, and amongst my favourite records by her I include, *If You Don't Give Me What I Want*, *Back Woods Blues*, *Penitentiary Bound Blues* and *Popular Bluff Blues*'. To these I would add two of my own favourites, *I Want My Sweet Daddy Now*, and *I'm A Good Gal A Thousand Miles From Home*.

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