

1. EH LA BAS
2. GULF COAST BLUES
3. SOME OF THESE DAYS
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5. THE PEANUT VENDOR
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7. MAMA DON'T ALLOW
8. NOBODY KNOWS YOU WHEN YOU'RE DOWN AND OUT
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10. PANAMA
11. ST. JAMES INFIRMARY
12. JOHN HENRY
13. GET A WORKING MAN
14. PANAMA RAG
15. IN THE RACKET



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**# 1 - 12:**

**Billie Pierce** – vocals and piano  
**De De Pierce** – vocals and trumpet  
**Brother Randolph** – washboard  
 (on #1,3,5,6,7,10,&12)  
**Lucius Bridges** – tom toms (on # 7)  
 & vocal (on # 12)

**Recorded by** Dr. Harry Oster and  
Richard Allen in New Orleans on  
October 14, 1959.  
Previously issued on Folklyric LP 110  
& Arhoolie LP 2016.

**# 13 - 15:**

**Billie Pierce** - vocals & piano  
 Previously issued on Tone and  
Folklyric LP 117: "Primitive Piano"  
(which also included selections by  
Speckled Red, Doug Suggs, and James  
"Bat" Robinson.)

**Recorded by** Erwin Helfer and Bill  
Russell; masters purchased from Mr.  
Helfer by Arhoolie Records in 2000.

**Re-issue produced by** Chris Strachwitz  
**Cover photos by** George Fletcher  
**Graphic Design by** Morgan Dodge



# Billie & DeDe Pierce

## Gulf Coast Blues





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Although New Orleans is the cradle of jazz, the enthusiast who comes on a pilgrimage at present will find the shrine almost empty. While there are still excellent jazz musicians both young and old on Bourbon Street, commercial pressures force them to play in a hopped-up style which is not characteristic of the best traditions of New Orleans jazz. As Paul Barbarin remarked in telling his story to John Norris of Coda:

It's too hard on the street ... You don't get a chance to relax and some want you to play all that wild music, fast and furious, no feeling. They're just trying to pull the people in, that's all ... All this fast stuff - Where's the feeling in it? You don't call that music do you?

Off Bourbon Street, Kid Thomas' band

is still playing authentic New Orleans jazz, generally in neighborhood dance halls across the river, far from the heart of town, but the audiences are small and the jobs precarious. In general, traditional jazz functions naturally at several dance halls, private parties, parades, funerals, and an occasional fish fry, but the jukebox and the television set have put many musicians out of work.

With the scarcity of authentic old jazz, these examples of the music of a bygone era are important historical and cultural documents as well as excellent performances of some of the most appealing numbers in the jazz repertoire. Here then is the result of folk expression in an urban environment, the product of the fusion of blues, Louisiana French folksongs, worksongs, "Spanish tunes" (in Jelly Roll Morton's phrase), and popular songs from the mass media.

### BILLIE PIERCE

Billie Pierce was born in Marianna, Florida, June 8, 1907. While she was still a baby, the family moved to Pensacola, where New Orleans bands appeared as far back as Billie can remember. The piano at their house was seldom still, for the whole family played. Billie's father, mother, six sisters, and even her nieces and nephews were all pianists.

When Billie was only fifteen she accompanied Bessie Smith at the Belmont Theater in Pensacola for a week in 1922 during an illness of Clarence Williams, Bessie's regular accompanist. This brief association with the great blues singer had a decisive effect on Billie's vocal style.

After playing in West Florida and Alabama, in 1929 she came to New Orleans temporarily to take her sister Sadie's place playing on the Steamer Madison with Buddy Petit, a great New Orleans trumpet player who never appeared on records. In 1930 she came to New Orleans permanently to play with Alphonse Picou. Later she played at other spots around Ursuline and Decatur Street,

one of the famous "hot corners" of New Orleans during the 1930's. She had her own band at Luthjen's, which included George Lewis on clarinet. Billie also appeared at the Absinthe House with Armand J. Piron, the famous band leader and composer of "Sister Kate." Both she and De De accompanied Ida Cox, the noted blues singer. After a courtship of a few weeks Billie and De De were married in 1935. From 1935 to 1959 Billie and De De worked off and on a very extensive gig at Luthjen's Dance Hall in New Orleans, where they played for dancing nightly - to a mostly older working class crowd. During the 40s they also played in Florida and small clubs in Louisiana. Bill Russell first recorded them for his American Music label (now available on CD) and by the 1960s with the renewed interest in authentic New Orleans jazz, the couple soon were offered more stable employment. They became part of the Preservation Hall Jazz Band and toured all over the world under the devoted guidance of the late Alan Jaffe. Billie Pierce died on September 29, 1974.

## DE DE PIERCE

De De (Joseph LaCroix) Pierce was born February 18, 1904 in New Orleans in a French-speaking family. Local New Orleans legend has it that De De once beat out the mystical mayor of Bayou Pom Pom in a Louisiana French-speaking contest by knowing the word for monkey-wrench! Self-taught on the trumpet in the beginning, De De's first and most influential teacher was Kid Rena, whose one recording session does not give a representative view of the variety and intricacy of his style. He also took lessons from Paul Chaligny and he learned the fundamentals of music from Paul Barnes while playing in the latter's big band. De De's first professional job was with Arnold DePass's Olympia Band around 1924. He played second trumpet in the bands of Kid Rena, Chris Kelly, and Buddy Petit, and he also worked with numerous brass bands, such as the Young Tuxedo group, Djalma Ganier's, and the one in 1949 which performed for Louis Armstrong when Satchmo was King of the Zulu parade, the black celebration of Mardi Gras. Among the

notables who appeared under the direction of Billie and De De at Luthjen's were at different periods George Lewis and Big Eye Louis Nelson. De De Pierce died in 1973.

In 1971 Billie and De De are experiencing what is perhaps their greatest success with the Preservation Hall Jazz Band which has not only toured all over the U.S. but in Europe and Japan. Much of this long overdue acclaim is largely due to the efforts of one man who went to New Orleans and organized Preservation Hall into a smooth functioning enterprise. Just off busy touristy Bourbon Street, Preservation Hall on St. Peter Street employs the best of New Orleans traditional musicians nightly, giving not only joy and dignity to the players, but attracting New Orleans jazz fans from around the world. Allan Jaffe is the man's name and he also plays tuba when traveling with the Preservation Hall Jazz Band and he has devoted his time and energy to the music since 1961, after an initial effort by Ken Mills.

Richard Allen - 1971 (with some editing  
by Chris Strachwitz 3/28/2000)

## The Tunes

**1.EH LA-BAS** was originally a song in "Gombo" (Africanized) French, which De De picked up in southwest Louisiana near Lake Charles. While the words show little change, the swing of the tune and the style of performance are expressions of DeDe's fiery spirit and élan vital. DeDe's spirited adaptation has been widely copied in jazz tradition. The central idea of the song is that the singer eats good food and drinks plenty of wine at his cousin's house and the hospitality costs him nothing. The tune seems to derive from the World War I pop hit "Over There."

**2.GULF COAST BLUES** (Billie Pierce) is Billie's personal variant of one of the numbers Bessie Smith sang when Billie accompanied her at the Belmont Theatre in Pensacola, Florida in 1922. Bessie recorded the song for Columbia in February, 1923.

**3.SOME OF THESE DAYS** (Shelton Brooks) was composed in 1910 by Shelton Brooks and has become a standard in pop music. Among the best recordings are those of Louis Armstrong (1929), and Coleman Hawkins (1935).

**4.YOU CAN DEPEND ON ME** (Earl Hines) was composed in 1931 by Earl Hines. Louis Armstrong's recording on the Okeh label the same year is outstanding.

**5.THE PEANUT VENDOR** (Sunshine - Gilbert - Simons) was highly popular in the early thirties, with many recordings including one by Armstrong in December, 1930, during his brief return to his native New Orleans. The whimsical gay singing of Louisiana French words to this tune is unique with De De; he sings, "I am selling peanuts, peanuts today, figs, cakes, and hot tamales."



6. The music of **JELLY ROLL** was composed by Jelly Roll Morton in 1905, copyrighted in 1915. The "Original Jelly Roll Blues," as the number has usually been called, was probably the first published jazz composition. The exuberantly amoral words Billie sings have never been recorded before; they were made up by Billie and Butterbeans (of the famous vaudeville team of Butterbeans and Susie) around 1919.

7. **MAMA DON'T ALLOW**, popular in both hill-billy and jazz circles, was composed by Charles "Cow Cow" Davenport. Brother Randolph's inspired washboard playing is a result of both a remote heritage of African rhythm and also more directly, the swiny tap dancing of the late great Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. Brother plays the washboard with four thimbles on each hand.

8. **NOBODY KNOWS YOU WHEN YOU'RE DOWN AND OUT**, a composition of New Orleans singer, Jimmy

Cox, was recorded for Columbia by Bessie Smith in May, 1929. Billie's variant shows some of the changes the song has undergone in folk tradition.

9. **GOING BACK TO FLORIDA** (Billie Pierce) is Billie's own autobiographical reworking of a folk blues.

10. **PANAMA** was composed around 1920 by a West Indian, William Tyers. The recordings of this frequently performed jazz standard by Kid Ory (1944) and Louis Armstrong (1948) are notable.

11. **ST. JAMES INFIRMARY** is an old war horse, here sung with fresh excitement by Billie. Composed by Joe Primrose, a white minstrel show performer, this song has passed frequently from records to folk tradition back to records again.

12. **JOHN HENRY**, the greatest of Negro folk epics, here as sung by Lucius Bridges, is highly fragmentary in text.

Musically, however, the performance represents a liltily appealing interplay of voice and instruments.

13. **GET A WORKING MAN** (Billie Pierce) (along with the following two selections, recorded in mono) captures Billie alone at the piano taking all the spots with her voice and piano.

14. **PANAMA RAG** is a wonderful ragtime version of this well known

traditional and previously heard tune – I only wish Billie would have recorded more piano rags like this one.

15. **IN THE RACKET** (Billie Pierce) is a fine, bawdy composition by Billie and typical of the risqué material so popular especially with female blues artists in the 1920s and 30s.

**This item is not recommended for radio play!**



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# Billie & DeDe Pierce Gulf Coast Blues

**Billie Pierce** was a marvelous blues, ragtime, and jazz pianist and a very expressive singer who grew up in Florida where she accompanied Bessie Smith at a Pensacola theatre in the early 1920s. She later moved to New Orleans where she played professionally in honky tonks and then spent much time working for Preservation Hall and touring all over the world with the Preservation Hall Jazz Band. Her husband, **De De Pierce** was one of the most joyful and powerful New Orleans trumpeters as well as a superb vocalist specializing in the unique, regional Creole French patois. His rendition of "Eh La Bas" will knock you off your chair (or off your feet if you are standing!). These recordings were made in the 1950s when both were at their peak and playing regularly for dancers at Luthjen's dance hall in New Orleans. This CD includes all of Arhoolie LP 2016 plus three solo bonus tracks by Billie Pierce recorded for Erwin Helfer's Tone label.

FILE UNDER: JAZZ



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