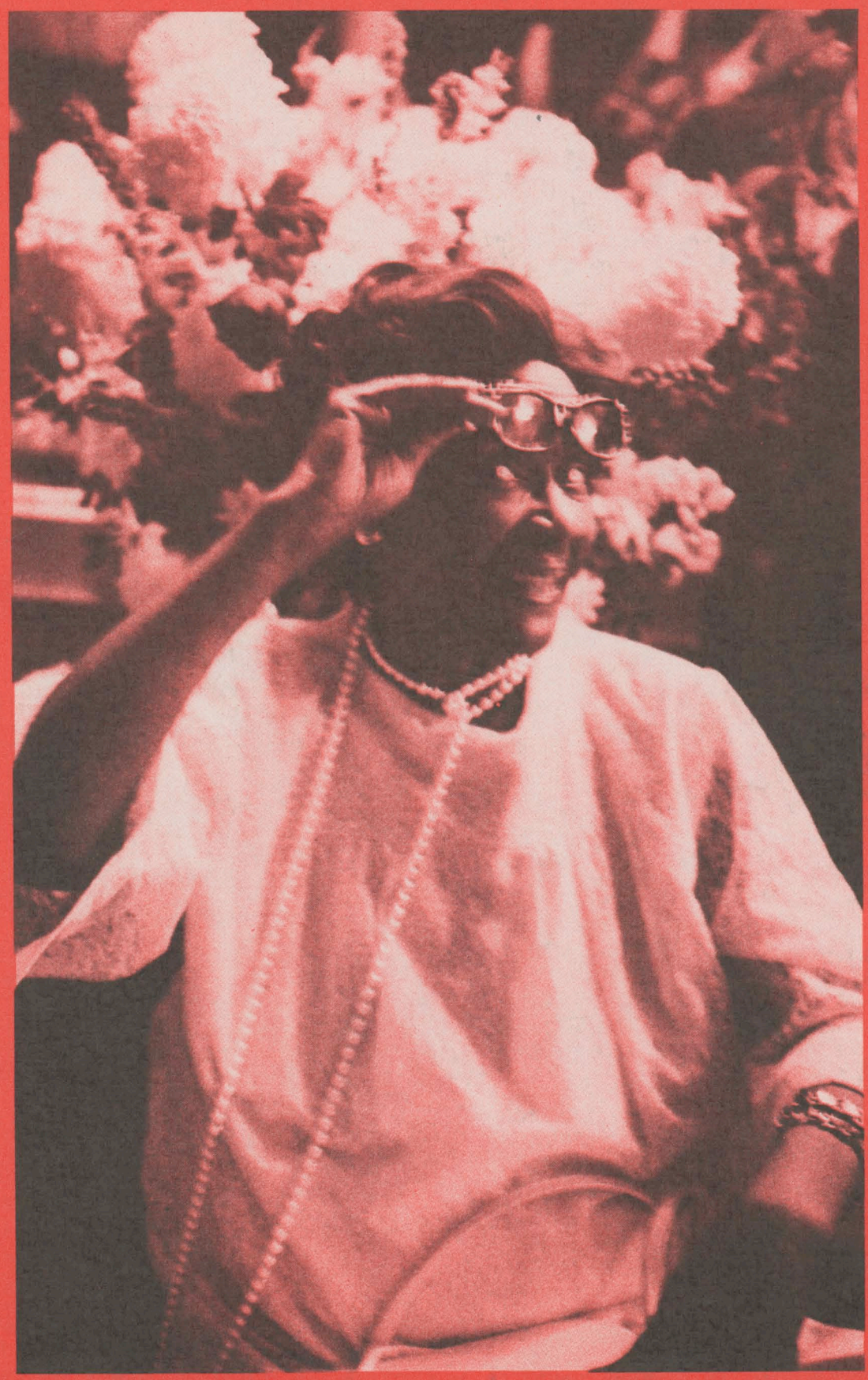
FOLKWAYS RECORDS FS 3541

THE BLUES IS LIFE

VICTORIA SPIVEY



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SIDE 1

Band 1. By Yourself 2:20
Band 2. Eagle and Hawk 3:00
Band 3. You're My Man 4:35
Band 4. Don't Worry About It 3:16
Band 5. Low Friends 2:07
Band 6. Kazoo Papa Blues 2:48

SIDE 2

Band 1. Don't Care 1:50
Band 2. My Head Is Bad 2:08
Band 3. Six Foot Daddy 4:45
Band 4. Can I Wash Your Clothes 2:40
Band 5. Good Sissages 1:40
Band 6. Big Black Belt 2:59

THE BLUES IS LIFE
VICTORIA SPIVEY

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

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FOLKWAYS RECORDS Album No. FS 3541

THE BLUES IS LIFE

VICTORIA SPIVEY

Notes by David Jasen

"Longevity, creativity and roots have given the remarkable blues woman, Victoria Spivey, a living legendary status in today's music world. She has fused the sounds of today with those of yesterday." This is the way research scholar and Miss Spivey's biographer, Len Kunstadt vividly described her place in music history.

If the petty rivalries and easily-ruffled vanities of the blues' celebrated grand dames are legendary, the selfless generosity of "Queen Vee" Spivey towards other performers has added special luster to her own legend. Instead of denigrating or competing against her show business counterparts, she promotes them, as when, in the course of her 1961 comeback appearances at Gerde's Folk City in New York, she encouraged the then unknown Bob Dylan to sit in on her own sets. Characteristically, she then recorded his harmonica playing on the label she had recently founded, Spivey Records. Today Miss Spivey's company remains one of the only existing labels dedicated solely to recording and preserving blues talent (Dylan, of course, appeared as a sideman behind Big Joe Williams). Not all of her charges are well-known, but that does not dampen her dedication to them, or her commitment to the blues field. As her calling card announces: "Blues Is My Business."

Victoria's business regularly takes her to college concerts and folk festivals here and abroad, and she has been continously active as both a performer and record executive for the past fifteen years. She is the last still-touring blues singer working within what is usually called the "classic" blues tradition -- the sophisticated female band singers whose most famous representatives included Mamie Smith, Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, and Ethel Waters. It was such singers who dominated the first six years of blues recording (1920-1926), only to become displaced by a wave of self-accompanied blues guitarists like Blind Lemon Jefferson and Lonnie Johnson. As a pianist whose earliest roots lay in the traditions represented by such musicians, Victoria became one of the few blues singers who managed to bridge both "classic" and country musical categories. Such versatility is quite astonishing, for the gulf between "classic" and country blues, in terms of both setting and musical concept, was formidable.

Generally, the "classic" blues were conceived for presentation in black urban vaudeville theatres (and sometimes, tent or minstrel shows) that offered a mixture of blues and musical comedy to a sedentary audience. Whereas country blues was music to dance to or party by, "classic" blues was staged for listening and watching. Its tempos were slower than those of the typical country blues, and its melodies (often embellished by jazz band accompaniment), more elaborate. Greater attention was given to thematic lyrics and clarity of vocal diction; the vocalist was something of a dramatic actress, conveying a story in song and gesture, often as part of a stage skit. Whereas the country blues singer who plied the barrelhouse of house party circuit would offer randomly-ordered couplets that belonged to no artist in particular, the vaudeville singer more often relied on the compositions of professional songwriters like Clarence Williams or Porter Grainger. The vaudeville blues performance had a strong visual dimension, with the singers using glamorous wardrobes, frequent costume changes, and dance routines to dazzle their audiences. In short, the "classic" blues belonged to the legitimate stage tradition, and the country blues to an amateur or "folk" tradition.

It was undoubtedly because of the first blues hit (Mamie Smith's Crazy Blues of 1920) was produced by a vaudeville singer that formula-minded record executives concentrated on such artists to the virtual exclusion of country singers for the better part of the next decade. This preoccupation also reflected an industry assumption that the vaudeville blues singer was an established name in black show business circles, and was thus more likely to sell records. The vaudeville singer was also more accessible to record executives, as there were several black theatres in the two cities (New York and Chicago) that were the centers of early blues recording. However, the recording medium itself was not always hospitable to the successful "classic" blues singer: it was impervious to the visual effects that were the stock-in-trade of many theatre singers, and reduced their artistry to the level of pure sound. As Mayo Williams, who discovered Ma Rainey and Ida Cox for Paramount Records, explained: "There was a great difference between playing for a theatre audience and for records...In recording they had to sing from the soul, instead of just shaking and dancing."

Enter Victoria Spivey, one of the last of the female blues singers to reach recording stardom. That she managed to do so when the vogue for "classic" blues had already begun to ebb was a demonstration of her convincing artistry and lack of gimmickry. That she managed to eclipse and outlast her theatre blues predecessors had much to do not only with her soulful singing style, but her flexibility. Instead of locking herself into any single musical formula, she meshed equally well with jazz accompanists like Louis Armstrong or King Oliver, with blues guitarists like Tampa Red and Lonnie Johnson (her favorite guitar accompanist), the piano accompanists of John Erby and Porter Grainger, or with her own piano playing. Instead of covering the hit titles of other "classic" blues singers she could readily imitate, she established herself as anoutstanding song writer. Two of her compositions -- Black Snake Blues and T.B. Blues have become part of the standard blues repertoire, while songs like You Done Lost Your Good Thing Now and No, Papa, No! have been recorded by B.B. King, and the latter by Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong. It is estimated that she has

written 1500 songs. Once, she recalls, a doctor instructed her friends to hide her writing materials "because I was cracking up from writing too much." Soon she found herself setting down lyrics with an eyebrow pencil on a paper bag. It goes without saying that she penned twelve original compositions for this album, on which she also performs her own piano and ukulele accompaniments.

Victoria was born in Houston, Texas of a musical family; at the turn of the century her father Grant and several uncles operated a local string band. As a child prodigy she began her own career around 1914 or 1915 under the tutelage of a Houston pianist named Robert Calvin (nicknamed "Snake"), who had been her older sister Leona's boyfriend. Later she would learn organ as well. In her early years, she worked as a vocalist for two Texas jazz and blues bands, headed by Lazy Daddy Fillmore and L.C. Tolen. She also played for tent shows and provided accompaniment for a silent movie theatre in Houston. In the early 1920's, she was frequently found in the rough barrelhouses that lined the "wards" of Houston and Galveston, in the midst of such country blues artists as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Joe Pullum, and Bernice Edwards. In addition, she sang with the Houston vaudeville singers Hociel Thomas and her aunt Sippie Wallace ("The Texas Nightingale"), who became a blues recording celebrity in 1923.

An early twenties' appearance by Mamie Smith in Houston's city auditorium fueled her own determination to seek stardom as a blues singer. She almost found a mentor in Ida Cox, who was greatly impressed by her singing during a 1925 visit to Houston: "Ida wanted to bring me out of Houston, but something happened that night, and they left without me. I cried all that night because they didn't take me."

It was Victoria's own spunky persistence that led to her dramatic show business breakthrough the following year. Urged on by her brothers, she traveled to St. Louis to audition for Jesse Johnson, who operated the city's leading outlet for blues records and acted as a talent scout for OKeh Records. When she arrived at Johnson's Market Street store she was politely discouraged by his wife Edith, who would later make records in her own right. "...I spoke to the girl behind the desk," she told Paul Oliver in Conversations With The Blues. "...'Is the manager here?' And she says, 'He's due back tomorrow. What you want with him?' ...'Well,' I say, 'I'm a singer and I wanna make a record!' ...She says, 'Girl, you better go home!' I says, 'What's home? I live in Houston, Texas, and I'm not goin' home. I come here to make a record.' She says, 'Well, there's a piano over there; can you play the piano?' I says, 'I certainly can!' I was darin'... So I just sit there and commence to whippin' on them ole Black Snake Blues!"

Black Snake wryly invoked her sister's disparaging nickname for the dark-skinned Robert Calvin. It would become an overnight hit, and inspire the lyrics of one of Blind Lemon Jefferson's most successful recordings, the thrice-recorded Black Snake Moan. Over the following decade Miss Spivey would not only record seventy-five-odd titles, but became a staff song writer for the St. Louis Music Company as well, in which capacity she authored a hundred different songs (many uncredited to her). Vaudeville tours augmented her recording and song writing career, and she became the only blues singer of her era besides Bessie Smith to reach Hollywood when, under the auspices of her recording partner Clarence Williams, she successfully auditioned for a starring role in King Vidor's famous all-black 1929 musical, Hallelujah. In the 1930s she toured colleges and dance pavilions from the midwest to the New England states as the featured singer and leader of the Omaha-based jazz band, Hunter's Serenaders. She also assembled a family revue that included her singing sisters Elton (the Za Zu Girl) and Addie (Sweet Peas) and her brother Sam, who danced and played drums. After a stint with the Olsen and Johnson comedue revue Hellzapoppin around 1939 or 1940, she spent a highly successful decade touring America and Canada in the company of the show dancer Billy Adams, doing singing, dancing, comedy, and acrobatic routines. A decade of semi-retirement (devoted partly to church-singing) followed. She had been back in professional circulation for less than two years when she recorded this album for Folkways (with the assistance of Drummer Pat Wilson and the kazoo-player, "Kazoo Papa"), but she had lost none of her early mastery of the blues, which she says, "You must feel in your heart, most of all, not in your brains or in the interest of your pocket."

THE BLUES IS LIFE

"The Blues is life and life is the Blues. It covers from the first cry of a newborn to the last gasp of a dying man. It's the very existence."

This is the way VICTORIA SPIVEY, the main subject of this LP, explained her feelings toward the blues. She has had the blues and has sung them for many years.

It seems justified that women were the first to record the blues as they carry the burden of life. Back in the early '20s there evolved into our musical society a group of Negro women, a proud numerous clan, who were to lay the blues cornerstone and foundation with their pioneer phonograph recordings. There were the fabulous Smiths: Mamie, Bessie and Clara. There were Ida Cox, Ma Rainey, Sara Martin, Ethel Waters, Rosa Henderson, Viola McCoy, Lucille Hegamin and Monette Moore. Still more in Julia Moody, Hazel Meyers, Alberta Hunter, Hannah Sylvester, Victoria Spivey and many others.

In 1962 their ranks have thinned to an unbelievable few. The grim reaper has had a field day. They lived tough and rough lives, many of them passing before their 50th birthday. Even though these women were responsible for creating the initial interest in blues, an industry in itself today, employing thousands of people, so little has been done to give the majority of these pioneers their proper status historically in our native American musical culture. Many scholars have embarked on an industrious campaign to document the lives of the so-called rural country blues singers (many contemporary and mostly male) and have almost rudely discarded these pioneering blues women, brushing them off as vaudeville types. This shows a distorted narrow-minded direction diluted with ignorance. Let's hope for more objective, erudite blues scholarship.

Fortunately, some recording companies are now searching and have found survivors of that glorious golden age of the Blues. They are being recorded again. Surprisingly enough, these women can still sing well. In the last few years, Ida Cox, Alberta Hunter, Lucille Hegamin, Hannah Sylvester and Victoria Spivey, all 40-or-more-year veterans, have been rediscovered.

One of the most sparkling examples of this group is Victoria Spivey. Not only does she wail and moan those blues like the years of yore but her previously undiscovered prowess as a pianist, organist and ukelelist have been brought to the fore, too. Miss Spivey's talents have appeared on 4 LPs for another company, and believe-it-or-not, on a 45 rpm, 45 EP and 3 LPs for her own company, curiously known as Queen Vee Spivey.

On October 18, 1962 she cut her first LP for Moses Asch and Folkways. She considers it a great honor to be represented in "that wonderful Folkways catalogue of artists of which Mr. Mose (sic) Asch has put together (so stated Miss Spivey in her own words)."

She has supplied Folkways with 13 original compositions especially written by herself for the recording date. There is even an instrumental for kazoo and ukelele in the group. She is accompanied by the fine promising drummer, Pat Wilson, and a kazooist who for the time being we must refer to as "Kazoo Papa" (coined by Miss Spivey especially for this recording date).

Victoria Spivey's blues are of a frank folkish purity and sincerity and perhaps the most representative of the early manifestations of our blues heritage. Her blues lyrics mirror personal emotions, experiences and happenings. She will also travel the crooked road of superstition and fantasy. On her blues loom she weaves such subjects as illness, infidelity, unrequited love threaded with a cord of sardonic humor. Victoria Spivey, a Texas product, is one of the last delineators of pure Texas-style woman blues singing. Like the vast expanses of this state she demands complete freedom in her delivery. She explains that "to pay too much heed to standardized blues tones and bars spoils the emotional impact inwardly for yourself. You must make the whole body sing the blues from your toes right up to the top of your head. You must feel in your heart most of all, not in your brains or in the interest of your pocket. Let your manager worry about your pocket. Flat tones, whether they be hard or soft, show the freedom in blues singing. You should never know when they come out of you. The heart will tell the voice when."

Miss Spivey carries on further here by providing background data for the 13-tracks on her initial Folkways LP:

BY YOURSELF — A Lonely Woman Blues

"A woman who has once meant so much to others finds herself sick and alone with all her loved ones gone. She's sending all her loved ones a message that they will cross the same bridge some day."

EAGLE AND THE HAWK — Jealousy Blues

"Here is a man very possessive over a woman because of jealousy. He doesn't want her to go any place without him. He's like a Hawk with sharp eyes and a stealing Eagle who stole her heart. She wonders what he sees in her, anyway."

YOU'RE MY MAN — Slick Chick Blues

"Here's a slick chick who landed up in jail. She always gave her man plenty of money. One night she was caught and taken to jail. While in jail she made friends with another girl who got out before she did. This other girl promised to look in on her 'old man' for her. The man was found with another chick. The girl in prison was told of this and just prayed for the day when she would get out. The day before she was released she wrote her 'old man': 'I'm your Woman' and 'I'm coming home this very day.' She doesn't want to be outslicked by another slick chick."

DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT —Two-Timer Blues

"Here's a man who always uses the slogan, 'Don't Worry About It.' Here is a woman who is always worrying and hiding her pennies and always begging the man for money, not realizing that the man saw the loot in her stocking. So her nearest defense when she got caught was to use his favorite slogan, 'Don't Worry About It.' "

LOW FRIENDS — No Friends Blues

"A lonely gullible woman who always has plenty of real cash and so many false and lowdown friends. They would get together when they ran out of money and wanted a drink. First thing they would say, 'Let's go to her house. If she ain't got no whiskey you know she'll buy some for us. We know she's lonely.' When they get their free drink and steal a few dollars besides, you don't see them anymore till the next time. You have no friends without the almighty dollar."

KAZOO PAPA BLUES — Kazoo Blues

"Just look at that cat without his shoes on blowing the blues on that little kazoo."

DON'T CARE — Angry Blues

"Here is a woman who is angry at her boyfriend and she makes herself tell herself that she doesn't care what he does and that her love for him is gone. It seems really funny to her because deep down inside she knows it's not true. She's just plain old hurt and just counting the minutes for him to show up again."

MY HEAD IS BAD — An Alcohol Blues

"Sometimes you take a few drinks to make you think better and calm the nerves. However, sometimes a few drinks will not help you and you have to keep on drinking. Then when you think you're relaxed, you find yourself drunk and making a fool of yourself and hurting the ones you love. You decide that whiskey is no good for you so now you'll try gin. And before long that knocks you out too. Then you try to give it all up remembering 'how it beat you, dragged you, and threw you in a ditch.' Then, what happens? You weaken some day and you start drinking again. It's the same story all over again."

SIX FOOT DADDY — Incendiary Blues

"Here's a woman that has been out all night long with another man and comes tippin' in at sunrise, thinking her husband has gone to work. But he was 'squattin' for her. She told two or three different lies, and when he knocked her to the floor that really hurt her pride and she laid it on him. The last time he was seen burning and going splickety splick."

CAN I WASH YOUR CLOTHES — Humble Blues

"A woman who is in love with a man who really doesn't have to but wants to wash his clothes. He refuses to have her wash his clothes because he thinks she is too good to wash them, and she is humbling herself. He doesn't want her love to drag her down, but her love is so strong that she is hurt by his negative way."

GOOD SISSAGES — A Sausage Blues

"Here is a woman who has left her boyfriend and who moves into a new kitchenette. She doesn't have no pots, pans, knives, forks, etc., but she manages to get a frying pan and a pound of sausages. And after placing them in a frying pan she remembers that she doesn't have anything to turn them over with. But she has an old broken down pocket knife so she uses that. She became angry and went back to her man's apartment - and told him to wake up, 'Mama's fixing to take your life.' She was so angry with the sausage episode that she spoke too fast and called them sissages."

BIG BLACK BELT — Simple Minded Woman Blues

"She's got a good hard working man but she let her friends lead her around. Instead of being at home preparing her man's food, cleaning her house, she's following the gang. So here's a man who grew tired of the mess and he walked in on her party one day and laid a big black belt on her. And was she afraid."

ABOUT VICTORIA SPIVEY

Victoria Spivey was born in Houston, Texas. She was one of nine children. Her father, Grant (a former musician) was a stevedore and later a railroad employee. Her mother, Addie, was a practicing nurse. Two of her sisters, Addie (Sweet Peas) and Elton (Za Zu Girl), also were active in the music field and found themselves on to the recorded wax, too. At the early age of ten, Victoria displayed an amazing aptitude for singing and playing the piano. She was already "fooling around with the blues" which she heard from pumping an old pianola. As a child prodigy she began securing local engagements at theatres, halls and parties. At 12 she garnered a most important engagement by filling the position of pianist at the Lincoln Theatre in her home town. During the World War I years she began evolving the musical ideas for her BLACK SNAKE BLUES which was to become her great trademark and a very successful hit.

In 1920/21 Victoria Spivey heard Mamie Smith's pioneering Okeh recording of CRAZY BLUES; in 1923/24 she heard Bessie Smith's first recording, GULF COAST BLUES, Sara Martin's MICHIGAN WATER BLUES and Ida Cox's MOANING THE BLUES. All these blues served as initial heart-warming inspiration for Miss Spivey and in many ways spurred her ambition on to become a good blues singer.

A few years passed and Victoria Spivey became noted through the Houston and Galveston communities as a most remarkable singer of blues. In the Spring of 1926 Miss Spivey was already a 10-year veteran. She wanted to record. The nearest studio was a portable operation just set up by the General Phonograph Co., makers of Okeh records, in St. Louis, Missouri. Those were the early days of recording and except for some permanent recording studios situated in just a few of the main cities, all other recording talent were obtained by traveling portable recording studios usually transported in by train or truck. Victoria arrived in St. Louis and through the auspices of Okeh scout, Jesse Johnson, she recorded her own Black Snake Blues and three other blues in the portable recording studio. This occurred in the early days of May, 1926. By the summertime, Black Snake Blues was a great selling hit. She became identified as the Black Snake Blues gal. Her fame spread to all parts of the country. Demand was so heavy that repressings had to be made in subsequent months. She went on to record more than 30 successful sides (practically all her own compositions) for Okeh in the next two years. Such stellar jazz-blues musicians as King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Lonnie Johnson (their vocal duets became classics), Clarence Williams, Zutty Singleton, Red Allen, Porter Grainger, Luis Russell, John Erby and others were on her recording dates. She has left an indelible mark in our blues lore with her eerie compositions about snakes, spiders, alligators, mosquitos, flies and fleas. She forewarned us about dopeheads, nightmares, hoodoo and the ravages of TB. She even got a "bloodhound" after you. She was a mistress of the risque, too. In a lighter vein she described a chicken's "Funny Feathers" and "How Do They Do It That Way" (sic). Her attack against a tabooing society was most relevant in her great composition, "TB Blues," and was one of the high points in Miss Spivey's creativity. Such noted singers as Leadbelly, Josh White, among others, had made the TB Blues a major part of their repertory at one time or another during their careers.

In the closing years of the '20s, Victoria worked engagements between St. Louis, New York and Detroit. Her name was a weekly occurrence in the Negro newspapers. In late 1928, Victoria Spivey was movie bound as she was chosen by King Vidor to play the ingenue, Missy Rose, in his vision of Negro life and music, the first full feature all-Negro Talkie, "Hallelujah."

In the early '30s, Miss Spivey's attention turned to band-leading. She fronted one of the great mid-western jazz orchestras, Hunter's Serenaders, which then had a young Jo Jones as its drummer. She also guided the destiny of a fine band which included the legendary Jap Allen. During this period she also headlined a musical extravaganza out of Dallas, Texas, "The Dallas Tan Town Topics," with a band that included Buddy Tate. She was still popular in the recording studios having completed her Okeh and Victor contracts and continuing with Brunswick, Decca and Vocalion. Through the '30s Victoria did much club work. She also worked at booking, managing and as a talent scout. In 1938 she and the great dancer, Billy Adams (who became her husband), were in Olsen and Johnson's "Hellzapoppin," an engagement which lasted for 4½ years. Afterward, the Spivey-Adams act went on the road for the next decade under the aegis of Joe Glaser, performing at such main locations as Abe and Pappy Clubs in Houston and Dallas, Texas, Mike DeLisa Club in Chicago, Palladium and Normandy in Cincinnati, Apollo in New York City and many others throughout the country. They even boasted their own club in East St. Louis for awhile.

In 1952, owing to pressing personal commitments, Victoria went into semi-retirement in order to care for her family. She did occasional gigs at New York jazz sessions run by Jack Crystal and Bob Maltz. In the late 1950s she went into the church where she served as organist and pianist.

In the fall of 1960, Victoria began the blues rounds again. She was seen and heard at various New York City nighteries doing guest spots. She opened up 1961 with a 2-week engagement at Gerde's Folk City in Greenwich Village. She featured such classic blues as Gulf Coast Blues, Jelly Jelly, St. Louis Blues and her Black Snake Blues. She returned to her blues composing prowess with a vengeance and began a writing spree which today numbers more than 600 new compositions. She granted a recorded interview to blues scholar Paul Oliver while he and his wife were in Brooklyn, New York on their blues research expedition. For the noted German jazz scholar, Dr. Dietrich Schulz Koehn she broadcasted another time for the Voice of America. She also teamed up with her old sidekick, Lonnie Johnson for a historic engagement (a reunion after three decades) at Gerde's Folk City. She had, along with Big Joe Williams (of 12-string fame) and Roosevelt Sykes, an evening at Carnegie Chapter Hall. In addition to other engagements, she has appeared on TV and radio.

In the summer of 1961, thanks to A&R, Chris Albertson, she was rediscovered recording wise. In February of 1962, Victoria embarked on a venture of historic importance. She formed her own record company, QUEEN VEE SPIVEY, and proceeded to record in addition to herself such stars as Lucille Hegamin, Hannah Sylvester, Buddy Tate, Eddie Barefield, Big Joe Williams, Lonnie Johnson and Roosevelt Sykes. She has her own publishing company, too, to take care of the gang of blues compositions which fill her files. She contributes a regular column of nostalgic memories to the magazine RECORD RESEARCH. Biographically, a book on her life is now in its advanced writing stages. She has taken the overseas route in late 1963 as a member of the American Folk Blues Festival troupe which toured 8 countries and 22 cities on the European continent including Scandinavia and Great Britain. These are just a few accomplishments in the comeback of this living legend. She's still adding more.

Time really hasn't touched Victoria Spivey. She's ablaze with inspiration and creativity and you can see this when you observe her youthful face with her large expressive eyes glowing when the "burn" hits her. She and her blues are inseparable. For many, Victoria Spivey is a blues singer of the past, a legendary figure who has come out of the roaring '20s to show what she can do again! She feels that she has lost nothing. In fact she has gained immeasurably from all of her experience. She has been delighted by the amount of attention she has been given by the younger set and she would like to dedicate this album to all those wonderful young people.

Notes by Len Kunstadt
Recorded by Mel Kaiser
Produced by Len Kunstadt

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