

## **Bertha's blues "want you boys to remember one gal ain't got it all"** by Peter Drew

She came out on to the floor of the small Greenwich Village night club, moved the microphone far to one side with a contemptuous gesture, and began to sing. Her voice was powerful enough to fill the narrow room; it easily over-rode the conversations of the couples at the tables and the men at the bar.

She sang Careless Love, and the How Long Blues, and then just a long string of blues verses ("I'm leavin' your town, won't be back 'til fall.... Want you boys to remember, one gal ain't got it all.") and long before she had finished you knew you were in the presence of a woman who was really a blues singer. Even if you were, like my self, too young a man to have even a memory of how it was in the fabulous 'twenties you got something of the feeling of the days when you could sit and listen over your beer to Bessie Smith and Ida Cox.

Thus Bertha "Chippie" Hill, who made her first singing appearance shortly after the first World War and her first records over twenty-two years ago, came out of a seventeen-year-long retirement last Fall. She sings in a manner virtually unchanged by the years, but Chippie is well over forty now, plump, matronly-looking and bespectacled, altogether so mild in appearance that her voluminous voice and the earthy lyrics come as a distinct surprise to the first-time listener.

She is certainly far from being the greatest blues singer: Bessie and Ma Rainey must be ranked well above Chippie by any impartial observer. To the hyper-critical ear her vocal range seems limited, her volume almost unvarying; her tone is often harsh and she limits herself largely to a repertoire of fast-paced and bouncing numbers. During most of her first New York return appearance, at the Village Vanguard, she suffered further from an accompaniment that incongruously featured an electric guitar (Later, when the management relented to the extent of bringing in a trio that included Max Kaminsky and Ralph Sutton, the improvement was tremendous.).

But despite any shortcomings of equipment and delivery, there is much that is rich appealing and satisfying in Chippie's low down blues. In comparison with the current crop of big-band vocalists and cute commercial singers—particularly those considered by their followers to be "blues singers"—the vitality and sincerity of Bertha Hill's voice are really something to hear.

We found Chippie at the Vanguard bar one night and listened while she recreated some of her past. Clearest in her mind was a night she remembers as her greatest triumph. It was in Chicago early in 1926 shortly after she had recorded one of her earliest and probably her most famous side: (*Georgia Man*, with Louis Armstrong and Pianist Richard M. Jones behind her. "There was a record artists' concert at the Coliseum—at 16th and W abash. Louis was there, I think, and all the most famous singers of that time, and I just cut them all. A few of them were pretty good, but after I sang—that was all. I was about the biggest thing in Chicago that night.")

Chippie's career had begun in New York some years before that. Born in South Carolina, one of 16 children, she soon moved to New York. Early maturity seems to be a characteristic of blues singers: she claims to have been only fourteen when she made her debut at Leroy's, a once-famous Harlem night spot. James P. Johnson was in that show,

and Ethel Waters its star. But with fitting lack of modesty Bertha recalls that Ethel "didn't make no bigger hit than ol' Chippie."

It was Leroy who first gave her the name that has stuck down through the years. "'Cause I was so young, he called me Chippie, and I was generally called that."

A few years later, Chippie moved on to Chicago where, in 1926, she made at least ten sides with Louie and Jones. She recalls some pretty fanciful legends about the highly popular *Georgia Man* ("I have that record of mine; been offered as high as \$25 for it, but I wouldn't sell it."), including the time that "a man threw a girl out the window" because of it. "This man liked *Georgia Man* so much, and this girl was so jealous she broke the record and threw it out the window. So that colored man picked up the girl and threw her out after it. From the third floor—her face was all bruised up."

At about this time King Oliver was playing at the Palladium dance hall, and for seven months Chippie sang there. Before that she had been on the road, travelling with Ma Rainey's famous show. She not only sang, but danced as a chorus girl. "I was thinner then," Chippie smiled. Of Ma Rainey she remembers "gold teeth, a big mouth, diamonds all over her. She didn't care for nothing but young men, and there was always a bottle of moonshine under the bed."

Without hesitation she names Bessie Smith as the greatest of them all, although it should be considered that Ma Rainey was past her prime when Chippie worked with her. "When Bessie died, I got drunk for a week. I still carry her picture with me."

At the end of the 'twenties Chippie cut short her career to raise her seven children beginning a retirement that lasted until she made four sides for Circle late in 1946 singing old style songs (*How Long Blues, Charleston Blues, Trouble in Mind, Careless Love*), backed by men like Freddie Shayne, Lee Collins and Baby Dodds. Then, in the Fall of 1947 she made her invigorating night club return. "This ain't no church," Chippie reminded her listeners, "this is a tavern," and the scornful manner in which she rejected misguided requests for numbers like "Body and Soul" was a joy to behold.

There were also a handful of jazz concert appearances, including her highly successful featured role at the Bessie Smith Memorial at Town Hall on January 1 of this year.

Just a few weeks ago Chippie began the second full-time New York engagement of her reborn career, at Jimmy Ryan's on 52nd Street, backed up this time by Freddy Moore and Art Hodes. When her full-blown voice booms out on The Street these nights, some of the musicians and patrons in the bop joints across the way may think there's a ghost at large. But it's just Bertha Hill reminding us how it sounded in the days when they really sang the blues.

*(PETER DREW author of this combination interview and appreciation of Chippie Hill is a newcomer to the pages of the Record Changer. But he is a long time collector and experienced magazine writer under several pseudonyms and the ghost-writer of two hooks attributed to well-known public figures. The editors expect from Mr. Drew in the future many articles of commentary on the current jazz scene. )*

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