

Jook Women

by Barry Lee Pearson

In 1939 Florida fieldworker Stetson Kennedy interviewed the Dixie Harmony Four in a Cross City, Florida, turpentine camp. One of the quartet mentioned that they had learned a particular song in a "jook." Growing excited, Kennedy began to quiz them about the term, its origin, and its meaning. One of the group explained: "Some people call them bar rooms but a jook is a little different from a bar room. A jook is mostly an outlaw place. Don't nobody go there but outlaw people, people that don't care nothing about themselves." Kennedy inquired, "Are there women in jooks?" Enthusiastically, the group responded, "Yes sir" (Kennedy 1939).

The same year Florida folklorist, writer, and social critic Zora Neale Hurston found herself on the other side of the microphone acting as an informant during a Library of Congress interview. She sang several folksongs from her home state and answered questions about their function. Prior to her version of a piece celebrating the sexual hero "Uncle Bud," She was asked if the song would be sung in front of "respectable" ladies. "Never," she replied. "It's one of those jook songs and the woman that they sing 'Uncle Bud' in front of is a jook woman" (Hurston 1939).

Relying primarily on the memories and narratives of fifteen African American performers including Zora Neale Hurston, this article explores the representation of women participants in jook culture in folklore, literature, and local character anecdotes based on life experiences in the South. It considers the origin of the term "jook," its significance in Southern social life as an African American institution, and the opposition of other black institutions especially the church, but its primary focus is on the roles women played in jooks as owners, musical performers, fighters, and competitors for sexual partners.

Black folklore celebrates jook woman in several narrative forms including legends and the toast tradition. But the most striking examples are in the African American ballad

tradition, a form of urban folklore which coincidentally preceded gangsta rap by a hundred years. For instance, these ballads commemorate the exploits of Frankie (Baker), who went through every joint in St. Louis before she found and shot Albert, her trifling man. Then there's Delia Holmes the gambler, an East Coast favorite, shot down by Coonie Vaughn, who couldn't tolerate her liberated ways. Blind Willie McTell sang of her: "Delia, Delia took no one's advice: / The last words I heard her say was 'Jesus Christ'" (1949). And in Texas there's Ella Speed, whose affairs enraged her lover Bill Martin, who shot her down.

Jook women are also celebrated in blues, a non-narrative form presented in the first person. These include tributes to such characters as Robert Johnson's "Little Queen Spades," Leroy Carr's "Barrelhouse Woman," Ada Brown's "Barrelhouse Bessie," and Buddy Moss's "Gambling Woman Blues" among countless others. This is to be expected because blues was essentially forged in jook culture and draws on such jook activities as making and breaking relationships for its primary subject matter.

Zora Neale Hurston was the first folklorist and novelist to contextualize ballads and blues within jook culture. Relying on participant observation, she collected songs, lies, drinking and gambling customs, and other jook-related traditions, and unlike Stetson Kennedy she was familiar with jooks and not just as an anthropologist. She delighted in jook activities as a consumer and performer if not a fighter and was the first African American writer to treat the jook seriously.

"Jook is the word for Negro pleasure house," she wrote. "It may mean a bawdy house. It may mean a house set apart on public works where the men and women dance, drink and gamble. Often it is a combination of all these . . . Musically speaking, the Jook is the most important place in America. For in its smelly shoddy confines has been born the secular music known as blues and on blues has been founded jazz. The singing and playing in

the true Negro style is called 'jooking'" (Hurstons 1970a, 29). Hurston's spelling and definition correspond to the memories of older blues artists. For example, Howard Armstrong, born in Tennessee in 1908, recalls:

A jook--you know you've seen those machines that you put nickels and things in--now they call those jukeboxes, but I think that's a corruption of the word. Now I remember when, you see, back years ago--you talk about apartheid in South Africa--well, we had something similar to that. We called it Jim Crow in Tennessee and Alabama and those places. That was the black man's club, and they called it a "jook." See, jook: not J.U.K.E. but J.O.O.K. And so it was a place that opened its doors, you might say, to all comers. It was no place for snobs and what we black people call "saddity" people. It means snobs, elite, upper crust, and so forth. Well, everybody rubbed elbows or whatever they were rubbing on common ground, you understand. I know the first ones I played in, they had a wick stuck in a Coca-Cola bottle with oil, coal oil, or kerosene hanging around on the walls or even out on the trees--a line near the trees for light. Nobody wanted a lot of light in the first place. Well, every strata of society would be rubbing elbows or whatever part of their anatomy they were rubbing on that dance floor. You know what I'm talking about? Some guy might be dressed in his old plow clothes and brogan shoes. And here, maybe, one of the good reverends, you understand, was there on a little--they sneaked away with one of the choir sisters and things. They were all on common ground. And everybody seemed to have a good time. (Armstrong 1990)

As Armstrong noted, more people went to the jook than just outlaws despite the church-based propaganda against it. Even the preacher might sneak by for a good time Saturday night, then play the hypocrite the rest of the week.

Frankie Quimby grew up on St. Simons Island off the coast of Georgia and later in life joined Bessie Jones and the Georgia Sea Island Singers. Although she didn't sing blues, she heard it emanating from the jooks in her Gullah community. She also recalled the distinctions between who went to the jooks and

who didn't:

Everybody didn't go. It wasn't like a flux of people; it was a certain--in those days, as Bessie [Jones] would say, it was 'those kind' that went. You the "flaggers." But that's what we called them there on the coast, jook joints. And when I was a child, my daddy dranked, so he went to the jook joints. My mother was dead, but my stepmother, that raised me--she didn't go because they had it like: the nice ladies stay at home. And my family was the Sullivans, which were supposed to be up-to-date people because they owned their own houses and stuff. So they didn't go. (Quimby 1994)

Quimby's Sea Island memories of class divisions along with Bessie Jones's reputed use of the term "flaggers" to describe jook patrons correspond to the Dixie Harmony Four singer's notion of outlaw people at an outlaw place.

Linguist Lorenzo Tumor in his book *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (1949) traced the origin of the term *jook*. He connected the Gullah "juk" meaning "infamous or disorderly" to the Wolof "jug" or "dzug" meaning to lead a disorderly life and to the Bambara or Bamana "dzugu" meaning a wicked, naughty, violent person. There is also a Gullah personal name "Jiku," which parallels the Ewe word meaning excitement. But European origins of the term *jook* are equally feasible, including the French verb "jouer," to play, and "jouk," to nestle and collect in a covey, as well as the Scottish words "jouk," a place of retreat or shelter, and "to evade or play truant" and "jookerie" meaning trickery or swindling. To further complicate matters, in 1877 R.L. Dugdale published a sociological study of a degenerate New York family, whom he christened the "Jukes," who were prone to drunkenness and outlaw behavior.

Tracing the term through song titles paints an equally interesting picture which also reinforces the Gullah connection. Similar terms date back at least to W.C. Handy's 1913 composition "Jogo Blues." In his autobiography he explained the term "jogo" was inspired by the humorous custom of the Gullahs "and from there all the way back to Africa . . . when they

would say something not meant for outside ears they would invent words or attach new meanings to familiar words." He cited "ofay" for white and "jigawawk" for black and added that "jogo" was a synonym for "jigawawk" and meant colored (1970, 122). Novelist Rudolph Fisher also listed the term "jigwalker" among his current synonyms for Negro in "An Introduction to Contemporary Harlemlense" appended to the end of his novel *The Walls of Jericho* (1928). These terms correspond to later usage of "jook" or the verb "jook" or "jooking" as meaning doing things in African American style. In 1927 Edna Winston recorded "Joogie Blues," and in 1928 Tiny Parham recorded "Jogo Rhythm." In the 1930s references to "jook" appear in Walter Roland's 1933 "Jook It Jook It," John Davis' 1935 field recording "Jooking," and Cripple Clarence Lofton's 1938 or 1939 "Jook Joint Stomp" (Dixon, Goodrich, and Rye 1997). The "juke" spelling comes in with the jukebox in the 1940s as in Glenn Miller's "Jukebox Saturday Night." The term "jukebox" drew its name from the presence of jukeboxes in jooks or jook joints. Older musicians, by the way, tend to refer to these coin-operated music vendors by their brand names--Seeburgs, Rockolas, or Piccolos. But once "jukebox" became an established term, "jook" more often than not was spelled "juke," and derivative words such as the sports term "juke," meaning a graceful, deceptive move, inherited the new spelling.

So much for the relationship between "jook" as pleasure house, "jookin'" as doing something in African American style, and the eventual dominance of the term "juke." As a political act, we should return to the original spelling, "jook," to perpetuate the subversion of dominant culture Hurston initiated by elevating the jook tradition in the first place. Unafraid to poke fun at middle-class values and social snobbishness, she celebrated jook culture and drew the wrath of teachers and preachers alike who shared the opinion of Reverend R.H. Taylor, who recorded a sermon in 1936 in Mississippi titled "Jooks, the Dens of Iniquity" (Dixon, Goodrich, and Rye 1997). Moreover, in her fictionalized accounts of Polk County, Florida, jooks Hurston introduced the

literary prototype of the jook woman in her characters Big Sweet and Ella Wall. In her novelistic folklore collection *Mules and Men* (1935) these are strong aggressive women who are at the center of the jook hierarchy. Ella Wall's reputation was known as far away as Eatonville, where, according to Hurston, the men told stories and made up songs about her and other jook women: "They talked and told strong stories of Ella Wall, East Coast Mary, Planchita and other lesser jook lights around whom the glory of Polk County surged" (1970, 82). According to Hurston, there were even songs about Ella Wall known throughout the Florida jooks:

Go to Ella Wall
Oh go to Ella Wall
If you want good boody
Oh go to Ella Wall. (1970, 192)

Eatonville's Big Sweet spent her time in the jooks playing Georgia skin and woofing with the men. She would fight her man or fight for her man or to protect Hurston as it turned out. As Hurston described her, "Big Sweet didn't mind fighting, didn't mind killing and didn't mind dying" (1970, p. 192). As the heroine in her own collection, Hurston is also a literary jook woman as well as a real-life jook participant who brought several of the musicians she found in Florida jooks to the National Folk Festival in the late 1930s. But she is best known for her literary work, which valorized Southern black working class culture and its traditions--including the jook or jooking. Hurston was the first writer to show the jook in a positive light as one of the sources of vibrant cultural creations and to represent the jook woman as a self-possessed actor indulging in jook recreation on her own terms rather than as a fallen woman or a victim, representations commonly favored by the church and other black media of the time. Today Hurston's representation continues to influence such African American fiction as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* or Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*.

Having briefly considered the origin and

meaning of the term "jook" and jook women in folklore and literature, let us turn to the memories of musicians who participated in jooks and whose vivid descriptions present a clearer view of jook culture.

Mississippian Mamie Davis is a blues singer born in 1940. Her latterday Delta experiences have left her with fond memories of jooks. Like Hurston she makes the distinction between jook joints and jook houses and uses the word as both noun referring to a place and as a verb meaning to party and have fun:

A jook house or a jook joint is unlike the clubs. It's just a joint. It might be a big old building, and they got some homemade chairs and some tables in there, and they got old raggedy shades. It's not sophisticated like at all, but it's where people go and they just have fun. They are places that when you go in, you wouldn't suppose that it was a beautiful place because it's not. But once you are in there, you have a beautiful time. So you forget about what it looks like.

So that's what a jook house is. But then also a jook house was called that because it was always in somebody's front room of their house. They would have like a jukebox in them. They would have a stove where they'd cook, have a refrigerator full of beer and pops and stuff. And all of this was going on in one room. They'd have somebody over here shooting dice, somebody over here making music, and that was called the jook house. Then when they started buildings away from the house, then they were called jook joints. We still have a lot of those. We have some jook houses out in the country, and we have jook joints at the same time.

They had the house parties, but we just called them going to jook. My understanding, it's from "jook"--means you're going to have fun. You're going to party, dance, and get drunk or whatever. We don't have so many of those now, but we have some, and believe it or not you have more fun in those places than you do if you go up in the city to a night club. (M. Davis 1991)

Davis alluded to a Saturday night-Sunday morning sequence, noting that in her experience by the late 1950s folks could go to the jook and then get up and go to church without censure:

We did this on maybe Friday nights but basically Saturday nights. But on Sunday there was none of that because you had to go to church all day Sunday. Sunday night they had to stay home. Then they had to go to work on Monday. But Saturday night was the jook night. (M. Davis, 1991)

Despite Davis' recollections of the jook-church-back-to-work cycle in the Delta, the church was traditionally at odds with the jook. Parents, in particular, tried to steer their children clear of the jook either because they were religious or simply because jook activities were for adults. But that made jooks all that more attractive to children. As a child, Frankie Quimby determined she would follow in her father's footsteps despite her family's prestige. The jook was where the fun was:

My stepmother and my aunts and my aunt-in-laws--their life seemed so dull to me as a child. And I would say, "My God, when I get grown, I'm gonna be like my daddy. I'm going to the jook joints." Because it looked like when you go by the jook joints, like walking to town or going somewhere by them, they would be having so much fun. They didn't have air conditioning, so the doors and windows were open. And it just seemed like they were having such a good time. And I said, "Oh, when I get old, get grown, I'm gonna go to that jook joint." (Quimby 1994)

Sometimes children were allowed in jooks especially if they were precocious--depending, of course, on the proprietor's policy. For example, when she was just four years old, Mamie Davis moved from the country to the city of Greenville. Just after the move she and a neighbor girl went exploring:

When we got around the corner, there was this joint, and I heard all this music going. So at first I was just standing there trying to peep up in there to see what was going on, and that little girl kept saying, "Come on, Mamie. We're gonna get in trouble. We gotta go."

But I was so involved in what they were doing, she went on and left me. And so when I looked around, she was gone. So I went on up in the place

because at home, people would take their children to these kind of places. So I figured it was all right to go in there, so I went up in there. The next thing I know I was standing around the jukebox singing along with it and dancing. People were throwing nickels and dimes up, and I was enjoying myself.

Then it dawned on me that I had to get out of there. So when I come out, I didn't know which way to go because like I said, we had just moved in to this house. I didn't know my way home. I was just right around the corner, but I didn't know that, and so I just started to walking. My mom--when I got home, my mom said that they had been looking for me all day. They'd had the police looking for me and everything. And she said I just stumbled upon my house. See, I was walking down the street heading toward my house, and I was just walking and singing this song that they had been playing on the jukebox. It was a song that goes "Buzz me, buzz me, baby." See, I walking and just singing, and I only knew one line, singing that one over and over. And she said she realized then that I was musically inclined, you know, after she got through whipping me for being gone all day. (M. Davis 1991)

Davis got her whipping for being gone all day rather than for being in the jook because, as she noted, it was not that unusual for children to accompany their parents out in the country. More often, musicians claim they were not allowed in jooks because they were too young, or if they were part of a musical group, they could only go in with a chaperone. But single women, especially those in their teens, faced stern parental disapproval if they snuck off to the jooks on their own. Mississippi born blues singer Ernestine Jackson still won't admit that she went: "When I was in Mississippi, I was very young, and the jook joints--well Mama still don't know about that part. So maybe we shouldn't tell her. I left Mississippi when I was sixteen years old, so you see why I can't discuss the jook joints. I didn't go. I was never there. Not even the ones with the sawdust on the floor" (Jackson 1997).

Jooks were not only places to have fun; they were also businesses where food and illegal alcohol were sold for a profit. Women ran these establishments with or without the help of a husband or other male enforcer. Candy

Shines grew up in Alabama, and her mother ran a jook joint which became so popular the local deejay talked about it over the radio:

My father he died when I was about three years old, and my mother was on like welfare. And she didn't have enough money: like sixty dollars a month did not take care of my family. She had five girls and one boy. And she just didn't have enough income.

So she started making homebrew first. And she got so popular making it that people would come from miles around to get the kind they say that has that blue smoke coming off the top. And then after a while she had to move out of the project that we was living in, and she went to a single house, and then she got her a Rockola and opened up a jook joint--what you called a jook joint back then. And that's where I started trying to be an entertainer and listened to all the music, people like Blind Bud Bailey and stuff that was playing at that time. Matter of fact Blind Bud Bailey--a lot of people don't remember, but he was one of the like Delta blues sounding men back then. He would pull the crowd into the jook joint.

My mom's jook joint got so popular they started talking about her on the radio. Talk about:

"Don't go to Big Mary's house."

They called her Big Mary even though she was a very slim lady. And they say:

"Don't go to Big Mary's house. First go to the party, then go to the dance, and then go to the house of Big Mary. She'll still be open. And we'll meet up."

I can still remember it. He used to talk about it. He used to holler all the time:

"Jiving Johnny gonna have a little beer. You know he's going to Big Mary's house tonight." (Shines 1991)

Candy Shines wasn't the only female blues artist to get her first show business exposure in her mother's jook. Sandra Hall was born in Atlanta, Georgia, and was working the night club circuit with her sister at the age of twelve. But before that she cut her teeth at her mother's "fish fries":

At age five I was singing at my Mama's fish fries, so I was born in show business. The fish fries

was every Friday and Saturday. She'd cook up a batch of fish and sell Black Label beer. Back in those days everybody partied in their homes. All black people--that's what we did. That's all we did, cook out on Fridays and Saturdays and serve fresh fish and coleslaw and beer. My grandmother played piano, and my sister and I used to sing. And she built this little like stage in the middle of the room for the performer to stand on while she played the piano. Because she was always there, it was just so much fun growing up in show business. Well, I had a very strong-willed grandmom. She was an Alabama woman, so can't too much get out of hand with her because she could see out of all the corners of her eyes. (Hall 1999)

Candy Shines's mother was a similar "Alabama woman" who kept her eye on things and when necessary acted the role of enforcer:

My mother just didn't play. I remember a time we had like a fireplace that was in the Rockola room, and these couple of guys came by there this particular night, and I was standing there. He had something [tobacco] in his mouth, and they sit there, and they spit all around the fireplace and stuff. And my mom wasn't that kind of mother. You just couldn't do anything. And I walked in there and said:

"Mom, those people just spit all over your place, all up against the wall and the fireplace."

She walked in there and looked at that. She walked back in there and handed them a bucket of soap and water and two rags torn from old sheets or something, and she handed each one of them one and said:

"Now clean my fireplace back the way it was."

"We ain't gonna clean nothin'."

She stood back in the hall. I didn't even know she had a shotgun. All these years she had a shotgun. It was old and had a real long stock to it. And she just stood right there with that shotgun. And they cleaned it. Honest to goodness, I couldn't have been over five years old. (Shines 1991)

Fontella Bass grew up in St. Louis, a gateway city with strong ties to Delta jook culture. Jook traditions were perpetuated in the legal club scene but also in the illegal after-hours clubs which St. Louis blues elder statesman Henry Townsend referred to as "blind tigers."

The spirit of the jook also flourished in the urban rent party tradition. Bass's family was deeply religious. Nevertheless, when times were hard, she turned to the rent party to make ends meet:

I gave a few rent parties myself. I lived in the project, and to get that forty dollars a month I used to give Paree parties. That was Paree wine. What I would do is take five dollars and buy up some Paree's. And you could get a fifth of Paree for twenty-five cents. And some Robin Hood wine: "Forty," they used to call it--"thirty-nine and one." Robin Hood wine. And you could serve your party. And my uncle worked at the Holiday Drive Inn, so we would have little boxes of hot dogs, buns, and popcorn.

And I used to take the kitchen table, and I had a ping pong table that would turn around, and I would put it on top of there, and it would make a casino table. And then I'd put a blanket over it. So that was the gambling house.

Then on some Friday evenings I would buy a large buffalo fish. You could get a large buffalo fish at that time for about five dollars. I'd have them slice that buffalo, and I'd fry fish and make a pot of spaghetti and make some homemade slaw. Dinner: a dollar twenty-five (laughs) and plenty of beer. And that time the beer that was going really strong was Falstaff and Griesedieck. So we had nice times. Nice times. And any time after twelve o'clock midnight that's when the tables would start. See, everything else closed up at one o'clock, so people couldn't get in the door till twelve.

It was getting pretty big. At first it started with just a few people, and then we would have maybe up to twenty, twenty-five persons would come. The fellows that would gamble maybe would bring their ladies, and they would sit in the living room, and I would serenade them with records and food, you know, and everything.

One night I came home, and it was almost a hundred people waiting to get in my house. I lived on the sixth floor, so you had to get off on the fifth floor to get up to the sixth floor, and all these people were standing in the stairwells waiting for me to get home.

I said: "Wow!"

So everybody heard about the set and wanted to join in. So it was like an after-hours place, so I

kind of didn't want the police. So I kind of busted it up after that. But the house made money. Now that's what we call rent parties. And since I was a starving musician at the time--you know, working sometimes on the weekend or two or three gigs a week--that's what I did when I ran short. (Bass 2000)

Whether jook, jook joint, jook house, supper, fish fry, blind tiger, or rent party, these home-grown recreations took place within the segregated black community and included the traditional jook components: food, drink, music, dance, and often gambling. As we have seen, women could act as enforcers or as chaperones grooming their younger children to be performers, but older women also worked as musicians and dancers in these underground venues. Matilda Witherspoon, who recorded as Mississippi Matilda, performed in Delta jooks for nearly twenty years before moving to Chicago. She and her husband Eugene Powell ran a jook during the 1930s. Powell was a well known bluesman who played guitar behind her, but as he recalls, he was free to tend to gambling when she took over:

My wife she sang. She was a good singer. A lot of women wanted to sing, but a lot of them didn't have the voice for it, and they would never go too good trying to sing. They couldn't play guitars; they couldn't play nothing. Take my old lady: I learned her how to pick one little piece, and she gets that, and, oh boy, she gets going. But she can't play nothing but that one little piece I showed her. No, I played for her, let her dance, sing, sell that whiskey, and sell that beer. See, I would ask my wife to dance, and she would do that, and I would gamble then. I'd shoot--maybe I'd go out there and shoot fifty dollars. If I hit the man for fifty dollars, I wouldn't take it down. I'd say: "I'll shoot a hundred." Every Saturday night I'd make two or three hundred dollars . . . Yeah, I done good. My old lady was a fine-looking woman, and she could sing good. (Powell 1993)

Bo McGhee was born on the Mississippi-Alabama State line. His grandmother played harmonica in the local jooks and taught him to play:

My grandmother was my inspiration, yes sir. My grandmother was a blues harmonica player. When I was a little kid, I always wanted--well, you know, some kids is a daddy's baby; I always was a grandma baby. So Grandmother bought me a harmonica--I believe it was the key of G--when I was six years old. And she made me play on this thing until I was ten before she let anybody hear nary a note or anything I was doing. See, they had a pantry where they keep food. Back then it was no refrigerators, so we can up all the foods and stuff, you know, and put it in this pantry. So she used to tell me to get in there and play where I wouldn't disturb nobody and where the sound wouldn't get away from me. She said:

"When you get good enough, I'll let you know."

I thought she was getting rid of me. You know, I had no idea that it would turn out like it did. But eventually when I was ten years old, on my tenth birthday she told me one Saturday afternoon--she called me:

"Hey, Bo."

I say: "Yes, ma'am."

"Come here."

I went to her.

"Go in and put on those clothes, Sonny--those clothes I laid out on the bed for you."

"Where we going, Mama?"

She say: "You're going with me."

And she said: "You're good enough now. You're gonna take my place, and Mama's not going to blow ever no more."

I owe everything I know to my grandmother and the good Lord. (McGhee 1997)

McGhee's recollection of his grandmother as teacher and nurturer should not obscure the fact that she played in jooks up to the point that she deferred to her grandson. Moreover, despite its implications for gender prejudice, it shows a gentler side of jook culture. The more typical side of jook activity focuses on violence, which in turn conforms to the stereotypes associated with jook lore popularized by Hurston's representation. Many jooks were, in fact, dangerous and especially hard on women performers who had to contend with the advances of male fans and the jealousy of wives and girlfriends. Mississippi blueswoman

Jessie Mae Hemphill recalled:

I don't want to play at no jook. It's too dangerous. You'll get killed for nothing. You get up there, and you start to playing, and sometimes you'd be at these places where women are jealous of their man. And because one of the men maybe say: "Play, Miss Hemphill," they get jealous of it and could hurt me. And I wouldn't be meaning nothing. So I don't play at them kind. I play where I have protection for myself--somebody there gonna help watch over me. You say something to the wrong man, you gotta fight somebody. Because, see, I ain't going to fight with nobody. I ain't gonna fight with nobody because I ain't got no one to fight but me, and I don't know how many there be of them. You go to a place like that: they'll try to gang you up, you know. Their friends and somebody else--they try to gang on me. (Hemphill 1986)

In order to play jooks, women had to employ several survival strategies. The first was to work with a male companion or husband. The second was to try to act tough. But several blues women were also notorious brawlers. Big Mama Thornton was remembered for her size, strength, scars, and ability to strike fear into her manager Don Robey's heart. Bessie Smith, especially when drinking, allegedly knocked around show girls, musical associates, and the manager of the Apollo Theater alike. She also constantly brawled with her husband Jack Gee. But the most famous female musician to perform in jooks was Memphis Minnie. An attractive woman known for her violent temper, she cursed like a stevedore, chewed tobacco on stage, and lived by her motto "I drink anywhere I please." Chicago bluesman Homesick James, whom she taught to play, recalled, "That woman was tougher than a man. No man was strong enough to mess around with her" (Garon and Garon 1992, 70). Johnny Shines recounted a rumor he had heard: "They tell me she shot one old man's arm off or cut it off with a hatchet, something. Some say shot, some say cut. Minnie was hell raiser" (Garon and Garon 1992, 70). Allegedly she also beat up her husband Son Joe and pianist Roosevelt Sykes on the bandstand over a musical disagreement.

Such legendary accounts, whether true or not, demonstrate the ongoing popularity of the tough jook woman motif in blues musicians' folklore.

Ce Dell Davis was born in Helena, Arkansas, in 1926. As a teen, he was allowed to play in jooks as long as he was with an older musician. He recalled some dangerous ladies, including his aunt, who frequented the Helena jooks:

There was razor-toting women. Razor-toting women. I'm gonna tell you about a woman I know, an auntie of mine. She believed in toting a knife, and she sure would kill you. I know she killed three people. She killed one lady with a meat cleaver, and then she killed two other people with a knife. But she never went to prison nary a time because she's always run away. And, you know, they didn't do too much about people killing a woman back in them days no ways. You're on your farm or whatever or work for somebody--they say, "Oh no, don't bother that guy; he works with me, or she works with me." That's about all to it. That's the way she did.

Some of them women--man, they wear stockings back in them days, you know, when they didn't have garters. They put on that twist-them-up, you know, and then have a razor sticking in there. And you mess with them or something, look like you're bothering somebody, you better run. Because when you see her snatch that dress up on the side and reach in there, you better be getting out of the way. She cut your throat. I ain't joking. Yes, indeed she would. (C. Davis 2001)

Davis claimed he never got into any scrapes because people took care of him, but Mississippi piano player Pinetop Perkins wasn't as fortunate:

I went over in Helena, Arkansas, and one of those bad ladies got hold to it and stabbed me in the arm, and I couldn't play guitar no more then. I could pound down, but I couldn't chord the guitar. I would call it a freak accident. I was back in a café. We call it "Dreamland Café." Me and the boys was back there, you know, drinking beer and a little whiskey once in a while. A lady come back there and went to the bathroom. So after she went into

the bathroom, I just shut the door behind her, you know, to keep people from looking at her. So her used-to-be husband come on in and put two or three barrels of ashes up against the door, and she couldn't get out for round about an hour, an hour and a half. So I'm the last somebody she saw shut the door. So she didn't ask no hard questions when she did see me. She just lit on into me. So I played one-armed for a pretty good while. People say: "Hey, you play better with one arm than you did two." (Perkins 1994)

Perkins' tag line adds a dose of jook joint humor to his account. He also told me he didn't press charges and the "bad lady" paid his doctor bills, so they parted amicably.

Mississippi born Jessie White likewise got stabbed in the arm by a noted jook joint fighter whom he had the misfortune to be living with. He too refused to press charges noting that she "dreaded" stabbing him because she had to go out and work:

She say: "I sure hate I did that." (Laughs) I couldn't work. I laid around there. Yeah, that knife went in this side of my arm, and it come out the other side. All the way through this arm. Yeah. I sure am glad it hit my arm instead of, you know, it caught that thing, because she would have hit me in the side with that big knife she cut me with. But she sure had to get out and work because I couldn't do nothing for three or four months. But I was so glad when she told me she was gonna leave. Honestly I was. We were up in the Delta, you know, in the Delta. Pulling all that cotton. We was up there. Me and her. And it was getting kind of late, and we was sitting there in the camp. I wasn't saying nothing. She say:

"I'm going to leave."

I said: "What you say, what? I misunderstood you."

She said: "I'm gonna leave."

I said: "You mean to say you're gonna leave?"

I say: "Well, I'm gonna help you pack." (Laughs) I did. And got up and helped her pack her things and walked her to the bus line.

I said: "I sure hope that bus don't break down."

I walked her to the bus line, and sure enough she got on that bus. I didn't see her no more in about six months.

I was at this--the Rhumboogie out there that

night. And she walked in there. And I hadn't seen her in about six months. She happened to walk in there. She say:

"Hello, Jessie."

I say: "Hi."

She say: "I'm going home with you tonight."

I said: "Is you?"

I was scared to tell her no. Sure enough, that's the truth.

She said: "I'll be down there."

I went home and got in the bed. About two-thirty that night somebody knocked on my door. I didn't believe it was her. But I'm gonna tell y'all the truth. I wouldn't tell you a story. She come in there and stayed all night with me, and she ain't bothered me from that day to this one. She never said nothing else to me. That was Frances, that mean woman I had. She'd cut people. She had scars. You could cut her, and she look like she didn't--you know, I ain't messing with a person look like they don't care about their hide getting cut up. You know she was fighting a girl, and that girl was cutting, and she was licking that blood and cutting back. She was the stabbingest woman I ever seen. (White 1999)

Frances could fight and spend the night with whomever she pleased, whether they liked it or not. But after Frances left, White met his future wife, Christine, in yet another jook joint encounter:

When I moved to Jackson, I started working at the sawmill. Well, I quit that, and I started working at the gambling house. That's how I met my wife. She was seventeen years old. I'd go down there, and I was lucky: I was making money. And eventually one day, what really made me marry her--I'd been beating this guy out of about two hundred dollars, and he done throwed a gun on me. Christine--she say:

"He's got a gun on you."

Well, he did have a gun throwed on me, and he's talking--getting madder and madder. So she came in there and got between me and him. She says--and she's only seventeen years old--she says:

"You can't shoot my man. You got to shoot me."

Now I married her the next week. I stayed with her forty-one years before she passed, and we raised nine children. (White 1999)

White's stories of the two jook women are a study in contrasts. The former was mean and scared him, but he admired her and laughed at her memory; the latter he loved and stayed with--or more precisely she stayed with him--forty-one years. But the former story, a more complex and compelling narrative, elicited this response from White's bandmate Clarence Butler:

There was this kind in every town. We had the same thing in our town, Florence, Alabama. I live in Alabama; he lived in Mississippi right up the road from each other. We had one gal called Big Sarah. Big Sarah was some kind of woman, boy, I'm telling you. She had six babies and a husband. And she could hit harder than any Joe Louis I seen. And she was married. Her husband couldn't do nothing with her. He tried to chastise her, and she had to knock him out. I mean out.

So when she get ready for a beau, she go in one of them jook joints, and she look in there, see you. Well, she'd tell him, "You going home with me tonight."

He say: "I ain't going nowhere."

She say: "You watch. You wait a minute. When the show is over, you're going home with me."

So the dude's about half drunk and still be messing with all them women in there. The time she get ready go, she go over there and tell him, "Let's go."

Now you know how you is when you half drunk now? "I ain't going nowhere."

She say: "Well, you going. Either you have to go or whup me. Now which one is it? Which one is easier to do?"

She said: "The best thing is come and go. Because you whup me, I'll go on about my business, but it's gonna look bad for you to get a whupping and go." (Laughs)

It's better to go without the whupping.

And he would say something stupid like, you know, the F-word you and all that, and she'd knock him down, and the fight's on. He'd get up or try to. This dude named Billy--he was what's called the "tush hog" down there, you understand. He was a knock-out artist. Other word, them guys could be in the ring because they could one-point you, and you're out. Gone.

He hit that lady with all he had. And I done

seen Billy knock out a many guys, big and small. He hit that woman.

She shook her head and said: "That's all you got?"

And knocked him down. She got through whupping him, he got up, they left, they stayed together for about two months, him and her. Big Sarah and Billy. But he wasn't going, but after he got the whupping, he went. She told him so.

She said: "It was bad for you to get the whupping and still go. Better to go without the whupping. You gonna look bad before your friends." We was all down there. Everybody knew him was in there. He went with her.

But the woman was good looking. She was a little on the heavy side, but she wasn't gawky big--you know what I'm saying? She had a neat waist line, big, you know, and a big butt. And she had a nice-looking face, but I don't know where that woman got her strength from.

And a guy come in. We was over in Scipio one night; guy come in. He wanted her. She didn't want him. And then vice versa, the guy cracked her with a chair. I thought he hurt her. He knocked her down, and she just shook it off and turned around and knocked him out the door. Plumb out the door--from that man's glass door. And he cracked a chair, tore it all to pieces, and it didn't break the skin on her.

I told myself, 'If you ever walk over to me and say 'Let's go,' I'm going.' (Butler 1999)

Butler's reaction, "There was this kind in every town," serves as a framing device introducing a story he has told before. With its clever punch line, no pun intended, it moves in the direction of a traditional local character legend artistically comparable to Hurston's literary telling of the fight between Big Sweet and Ella Wall. In both cases the presence of a traditional character firmly established in folk memory elicits immediate recognition. Moreover, White's and Butler's back-to-back accounts imply a competition of sorts as to whose town boasted the tougher character. Among male storytellers such accounts of violent jook women drew laughter and admiration. Hurston's finding these characters worthy subjects for her literary endeavors suggests that such admiration transcends gender.

That Big Sarah has a family, which she

rules, and the strength and freedom to take whichever beau she desires places her outside conventional middle-class morality. But within jook culture her exploits are noteworthy. Such stories also epitomize blues values and remind us once again that jook and blues cultures are one and the same. Butler's tale pushes credibility to hyperbole, squeezing laughter from pain, doing it with grace, wit, and elegance. Albert Murray (1993) refers to these qualities as central to the blues idiom. And it makes sense that blues musicians as storytellers value these same qualities.

Looking back over the various roles women have played in jook culture in this limited sample, we have seen them as entrepreneurs and proprietors, as protectors and nurturers, as performers, and finally as fighters and sexual competitors. From Big Sweet to Big Mary to Big Sarah they have been lionized in literary representation, through the medium of local radio, and in the anecdotes of other jook patrons. From these musicians' commentary it is clear that just as the jook was a major African American institution central to the development of American art, jook women were central to jook activities. Despite being maligned as outlaws or flaggers, they ran these good time events and inspired and created blues music and blues and jazz dance, participating in the full spectrum of jook activities. As the subjects of ballads, blues songs, local legends, and individual memories, they are firmly established in jook history. Reiterating Stetson Kennedy's initial query, "Are there women in jooks?" we can add these voices to those of the Dixie Harmony Four in a rousing "Yes sir."▲▼▲

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Straightlace Shoes, Boxback Coat by Jerry McGuire

"Tell the boys I died standin' pat."

In the Great Original, nothing gulps and spits
blood or reaches for its crotch. A hedging
pissoff snubnose sort of guy, shot full of
innuendo, all you need to know. His gut
has been emptied into a bucket, the cavity
filled with heavy honcho stones. "Nobody to mess with,"
as they said of Satchmo.

And off the tailgate, more gutbucket. As if the guy's
trying to tell us something, but doesn't care
if we get it. Slow drag, ultimately mumbles,
bugs that hopalong bunch, all the white horses
and creole whores. Yellow girls just shine,
bright red dresses, boogaloo second line,
snaggleteeth landlord's happy as a grub.

Octoroon with a licorice stick. Swellhead
highstepping and the bass drum, covered
with bedsheets up against the wall
in another room. In walks a white man
to stand behind, and another who just kicks ass
for him. The background a deliberate hissing.
Banjo Gate on the beat all grinnin'.

'Til some mama like Mother Eve all mixed up
with Mother Earth and Mother Africa kicks
the slicks aside and dopes up the air, strides the piano,
big black hearse. No innuendo here, just blare
and glare. Spunkface uppity like her whole life
was a dare, and she took it. They start in with St. James
Infirmary, and segue to Rockin' Chair.

