

The Victoria Spivey Collection: An Overview, with a Supplementary Bibliography of Spivey's Jazz Criticism¹

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The life and career of blues singer Victoria Spivey (1906–1976) defies easy categorization. She was, at one point or another: a bar-room pianist, a top-selling “race” recording artist, a staff composer for a music publishing company, one half of a vaudeville double-act, a Hollywood actress, a church music director, a record producer and label owner, a booking agent, and a jazz critic. A larger-than-life figure, “Queen” Victoria Spivey (as she often styled herself) dedicated much of her life to “holding court,” building and maintaining community amongst the aging blues and jazz musicians with whom she had previously worked, while also mentoring a younger generation of performers, record collectors, and jazz enthusiasts in 1960s and ‘70s New York City.

Born in Houston, Texas in 1906, Spivey began performing professionally when only a teenager, learning the latest hits by ear at local record stores and from other established local pianists, before performing them at the many house parties, bars, and sporting houses of the Fifth Ward. She soon met the blues guitarist Blind Lemon Jefferson, with whom she would work with regularly in Houston, Galveston, and other neighboring cities. Known for her trademark vocal “moan,” by the early 1920s Spivey was becoming recognised by notable blues singers such as Ida Cox, who encouraged her to pursue a recording career. In 1926, Spivey moved to St. Louis, Missouri, and approached the Okeh label to record her; between 1926 and 1928 she made no fewer than thirty-eight sides for the label and worked as a staff composer. Her most successful hit was “Black Snake Blues,” which Jefferson would later restyle as “Black Snake Moan.” In 1929, she had a minor role in King Vidor’s *Hallelujah*, one of the first Hollywood films to feature an all-African American cast. In the 1930s, Spivey toured avidly

¹ I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the following individuals who aided the preparation of this article: Dr Sean Lorre, Vincent Pelote, Elizabeth Surles, and Adriana Cuervo at the Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University; Lukas Proyer at the Institute for Jazz Research, University of Music and Performing Arts, Graz; and Michael Persico for permission to reproduce a photograph by Jack Bradley. This article would also not have been possible without the assistance of a Berger-Carter Research Grant from the Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University.”

with both territory bands and vaudeville shows, forming a double act with dancer Billy Adams. By the end of the decade, the pair's success found Spivey in another iconic show, the 1939 Broadway dance masterpiece *Hellzapoppin'*. Her relationship with Adams soon foundered, however, and the 1940s saw Spivey more or less retire completely from the entertainment industry; instead, she became the musical director of her local church in Brooklyn.²

The blues and jazz "revival" of the 1950s and early 1960s heralded a new beginning for many veteran musicians, and Spivey was no exception. She began performing again in 1961, sharing the bill with blues guitarist Lonnie Johnson at Gerde's Folk City in Greenwich Village, as well as a young folksinger by the name of Bob Dylan, who remained a close friend until her death. As well as restarting her recording career with Prestige-Bluesville in 1962, Spivey embarked on her own record label—Spivey Records—with her partner, the jazz discographer and magazine editor Len Kunstadt. The label focused specifically on recording veteran blues musicians, but also recruited up-and-coming New York and Chicago performers to record alongside their elders. Between 1962 and Spivey's death in 1976, the label produced twenty LP and EP releases, with Kunstadt continuing to make posthumous releases until the mid-1980s.³ Spivey also wrote a long-running column for Kunstadt's magazine, *Record Research*, entitled "Blues Is My Business," in which she provided her own inimitable take on blues and jazz history.

The sheer range of Spivey's professional activities seems exceptional, but her apparent distinctiveness is also a testament to the limited roles accorded to women musicians in male-dominated blues and jazz historiography. Women blues singers are widely agreed to have been crucial in the development of the genre in the 1910s and early 1920s but, when tracing the blues's development over a longer period, historians have largely focused on the male singer-guitarists that began recording from the late 1920s onwards.⁴ Indeed, the number of studies that attend to "blues queens of the 1920s" or "the classic blues singers" indicates the extent to which women blues musicians are considered *only* with reference to a formative—rather than continuing—role in the genre's

² Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (Newark: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 148-160.

³ For a comprehensive discography of Spivey Records releases, see Stefan Wirz, "Illustrated Spivey Records Discography," Wirz' American Music, accessed October 11, 2023, <https://www.wirz.de/music/spivey.htm>.

⁴ See Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *The Original Blues: The Emergence of the Blues in African American Vaudeville* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017).

development.⁵ What's more, musical evaluations of these artists' work has largely been confined to a binary of "rough"/"sexual"/"downhome" (think Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith) on the one hand, and "refined"/"commercial"/"theatrical" (think Alberta Hunter, Ethel Waters, or Adelaide Hall) on the other.

The Victoria Spivey Collection indicates just how insufficient such scholarship is for understanding the complex and multifaceted role of women blues musicians over the genre's broader development. Indeed, the collection itself was created out of a need for more reparative work on the archives of major women jazz artists. In 2012, the IJS received a \$165,000 grant from the Council on Library and Information Resources to process and catalog items relating to five notable women in jazz: Ella Fitzgerald, Abbey Lincoln, Annie Ross, Victoria Spivey, and promoter, journalist, and activist Wilma Dobie.⁶ The materials relating to Spivey are drawn from the IJS's larger collection relating to her partner Len Kunstadt. Offering a broad view of Spivey's life and career, the collection highlights Spivey's creative efforts as a composer, as well as her unstinting attempts to maintain control over her intellectual property. Above all, the collection attests to Spivey's love of "show business" and the kinship it created amongst musicians and critics alike. Comprising 8.5 linear feet of material, principally photographs, correspondence, song lyrics, business and personal papers, the collection spans more or less the years 1925-1940, and 1961-1976, although some photographs of Spivey's family evidently date from the 1910s. The collection is arranged in two series, the first devoted to Spivey's Music, the second to her Personal Files, although the extent of organisation within some folders in the collection is inconsistent. This article complements the finding aid already available on the Institute of Jazz Studies website, and draws attention to some of its highlights.⁷ It also offers a supplementary bibliography of Spivey's critical writing for mid-century magazines like *Record Research*, to draw attention to her own historiographical practice.

⁵ See, for instance, Harrison, *Black Pearls*, also Derrick Stewart-Baxter, *Ma Rainey and the Classic Blues Singers* (London: Studio Vista, 1970).

⁶ "IJS receives \$165,000 grant, to catalog women in jazz collections," Rutgers University Libraries, accessed May 13, 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/20210513075300/https://www2.libraries.rutgers.edu/rul/news/12/01_catalog_women_in_jazz.shtml.

⁷ Anders Griffen, "Guide to the Victoria Spivey Collection, 1925-1940, 1961-1976," Institute of Jazz Studies, accessed October 10, 2023, <http://www2.scc.rutgers.edu/ead/ijs/spiveyb.html>.

MUSICAL MATERIALS

The musical materials of the Spivey collection comprise handwritten and typed pages of song lyrics, in various states of finality. Some are written up in neat, while others are scribbled onto pieces of scrap paper and spare publicity flyers from Spivey Records. Included amongst these song lyrics are a number of copyright registration forms, together with the standard lead sheet settings that were required by the US Copyright Office for song registration. The volume of creative work documented here is notable, given that most blues scholarship—and particularly scholarship on women blues singers—makes little distinction between the composition and recording, to the extent that almost all of our knowledge of blues musicians' creative practice comes from their recording activities alone. In contrast, Spivey's materials show us an earlier stage in this process: the composition of songs prior to, and separate from, performance or recording; indeed, many of these compositions do not appear in Spivey's discography (see figures 1a & 1b). Interestingly, Spivey also drew on her "blues queen" stage persona to assert her professional and creative authority: a personalised stamp reading "Victoria Spivey / The Queen / Writer and Composer" adorns many of the manuscripts. A number of songs are particularly inventive in their sources of inspiration: the unrecorded "The Big Clock"—a reference to the Williamsburg Savings Bank Tower in Fort Greene, Brooklyn—shows the singer drawing on her everyday life and surroundings as a basis for musical composition. The collection also contains a number of lead sheets and copyright registrations for works by other women blues artists, such as an unrecorded composition by Lucille Hegamin entitled "Black Snowflakes." The number of copyright registration materials that can be found in the collection is striking in light of the dominant industry practices that Spivey and other blues artists would have been familiar with. It is well known that many recording companies conspired to cheat African American musicians out of royalties and authorship rights; in some cases, too, record company executives even listed themselves as authors of the songs that blues musicians brought into the studio.⁸ Spivey's efforts to copyright her own songs, and to assist in the copyrighting of songs by other artists that she worked with under their own names, suggest a concerted effort to identify herself and these other musicians as the primary beneficiaries of their creative endeavors.

⁸ For more on these business practices, see Robert Springer, "Folklore, Commercialism and Exploitation: Copyright in the Blues," *Popular Music* 26, no. 1 (January 2007): 33-45.

(Don't do it)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 - Don't you do it,
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 - Don't you try it
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 - well I dare you.

If you do it baby, I'll turn you upside down

2 Pattern

Want me to work for you, I don't mind
 Wash your clothes, I'll even sew
 Want buy me a rag, to put on
 baby baby I'm long gone
 Rather sleep in the gutter, than out me home
 went to far with your bull corn.
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 - don't you do it.
 Can common sense tell you going through a doggone fit

3 music

4

Help me some body, I'm bout to lose my mind
 help me some body I'm bout to lose my mind
 so damn mad, I feel just like dying
 Tag Done lost my mind

Figure 1a: Victoria Spivey, "Don't You Do It", Draft lyrics, Victoria Spivey Collection. Box 1, Folder 1. Courtesy of the Institute of Jazz Studies.

MUSIC AND LYRICS BY THE QUEEN DON'T YOU DO IT VICTORIA SPIVEY

INTRO SOBBY BEAT

1 + 2 3

LEAVE ME IF YOU LEAVE ME

3 CHO

DON'T KNOW WHAT I'LL DO WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME?

3 (1) (2)

CAN'T GET YOU OUT OF MY MIND LAUGHING ONE DAY

3 3

NEXT DAY I'M CRYIN I'M

(PATTER CHOP)

"MAD! I'M MAD! BABY GET YOUR BLACK SUIF OUT GOT THE

OUT (SOMETHING BETTER GIVE) IN BEST OF ME I'LL SURB TELL THE WORLD WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT

FINE

SCORED BY Ray Cobby At Unique Studios

Copy Right Richard Fox 1967

Figure 1b: Victoria Spivey, "Don't You Do It", finished lead sheet, Victoria Spivey Collection. Box 1, Folder 1. Courtesy of the Institute of Jazz Studies.

Even as she was writing new material, Spivey still maintained many of the stylistic elements associated with her early work. The singer regularly drew on

her experiences in vaudeville: many of her draft compositions include sections marked “Patter” (the quick-fire, spoken comedy used by vaudeville acts) interspersed between song lyrics. One particularly interesting item is a spiral notebook containing a draft of an extended duet between Victoria Spivey and guitarist Lonnie Johnson, another giant of the race records era with whom Spivey had first worked with in the late 1920s. This author was unable to trace this untitled duet in any of Spivey and Johnson’s recorded duets from the 1960s, suggesting that the pair may have developed it during their residency at Gerde’s Folk City in 1961. The collection also evidences Spivey’s attempts to branch out further into film and television: amidst the many song lyrics is a script for a musical comedy entitled *Riding the Waves*, an absurdist tale about a duo “Oliver and Jackson” who attempt build their own theatrical booking empire, first in St. Louis and then in New York.

Spivey’s reputation for more ribald blues topics, first established in her late 1920s recordings, continued in her later compositions. One typewritten lyrics sheet for “Grinding,” a song ostensibly about making coffee, is inscribed “words, music and innuendo by Victoria Spivey.” Some of the common metaphors of her early work, such as the “black snake” of her 1926 hit, are elaborated in these more recent songs: in “16 Men All Were Snakes,” for instance, a series of male lovers are each likened to a different variety of serpent. Spivey was also not averse to drawing on more contemporary blues styles, either: her song “Muddy Waters” is almost pornographic in content, and expertly integrates tropes of female sexual prowess into the structure of blues singer Waters’s biggest hit, “Hoochie Coochie Man.”

Two songs in the collection provide a something of a glimpse into Spivey’s time as a church musician. The first is a handwritten sheet of lyrics for a song entitled “If Any Body.” Each verse elaborates on the title phrase (“If anybody want[s] to help you / If anybody want[s] to save you / If anybody want[s] to care for you”), before concluding with the refrain “It is my Lawd [sic].” Another, simply titled “Jesus,” is documented more substantially, with several drafts of lyrics and a notated melody. Although there are some ambiguities in the text setting, its accompanying harmonies are obvious, and so there is enough here to allow for a full reconstruction of the song. Although neither of these documents date from Spivey’s postwar hiatus (“If Any Body” is dated May 1968 and “Jesus” is dated 1962) they nonetheless show Spivey working in a different, although clearly no less familiar musical vein.

CORRESPONDENCE

That the majority—if not all—of the lyrics and musical papers in the Spivey Collection date from the 1960s until Spivey's death in 1976 is a testament to just how active she was in this latter period of her career. The collection holds a wide range of publicity materials and correspondence relating to Spivey Records, as well as her recording and performance activities more broadly. Of particular interest is a 1962 letter from Spivey's partner Len Kunstadt to the British discographer and magazine editor Derek Collier, which sees Kunstadt and Spivey on the verge of launching their new venture; the letter details the pair's plans for the new label, including the material that they already have recorded and plan to record.⁹ In particular, the letter makes clear their plans for the label's international distribution, marshalling what was by this time a well-developed transatlantic network of record collectors, discographers, critics and jazz enthusiasts connected by the regular exchange of correspondence, magazines, and record auction lists. Also apparent from much of the collection correspondence is Spivey's unceasing quest for further performance opportunities, not only for herself but for other blues musicians. These efforts were not always successful. One letter documents Spivey's attempt to secure performances for Lonnie Johnson at Harlem's Apollo Theatre: "Frankly, I was not aware of the terrific 'come back' which you mentioned," manager Frank Schiffman responded, evidently unpersuaded by Spivey's boosterism.¹⁰

The collection also illuminates how African American musicians experienced the growing interest in the blues amongst international audiences. Spivey was a pioneer in this regard, starring in the 1963 iteration of the American Folk Blues Festival (hereafter AFBF) concert tours that travelled across Europe throughout the 1960s. Spivey was in many ways the lynchpin of the 1963 tour and, along with bassist and composer Willie Dixon, remained in close contact with organisers Horst Lippmann and Fritz Rau in future years, often helping these promoters locate blues musicians for the next tour and helping these musicians apply for travel documents.¹¹ These tours could pose difficulties, however, as European record companies sought to capitalize on the rare availability of African American blues artists. The Spivey Collection contains a long-running

⁹ Len Kunstadt to Derek Collier, July 25, 1962. Collier handled the international distribution of Kunstadt's magazine *Record Research*.

¹⁰ Frank Schiffman to Victoria Spivey, October 3, 1961.

¹¹ Victoria Spivey, "Sippie Wallace Sings Better than Ever," *Blues Is My Business*, *Record Research*, July 1965, 1, 7. See also Ulrich Adelt, "Germany Gets the Blues: Negotiations of 'Race' and Nation at the American Folk Blues Festival," *American Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (December 2008): 951-974.

correspondence between Spivey and the German record company Philips Ton, in which Spivey grapples with the company's idiosyncratic scheduling of royalty statements, as well as lingering uncertainties over her international tax arrangements (was she owed 750 DM or 443 DM, and did this include the standard 25% withholding tax?). On more than one occasion, she received forms to sign in German. Perhaps most galling was her discovery in 1967 of a US release of her AFBF recordings on Joe Bihari's Exodus Label, for which she was not receiving any royalties.¹² Spivey queried this release with Philips, who informed her that while they were entitled to "exploit" (their term) Spivey's recordings by releasing them in other national jurisdictions, this LP was evidently an unauthorised release.¹³ Spivey remained undeterred throughout these administrative hurdles: "I am trying to be a good publisher[,]” Spivey wrote to Philips in May 1967, "and have over 100 copyright tunes in BMI now. Quite a job keeping up with my compositions."¹⁴

If communicating long-distance across different national jurisdictions, languages, and markets created bureaucratic challenges, working with record companies closer to home in the wake of the 1960s blues revival often created the opposite problem: a lax and overly informal approach to contracts and licensing, as white record producers now invariably knew their recording artists socially, as well as professionally. In correspondence with Prestige-Bluesville owner Bob Weinstock—again over mixed up royalties and absent contracts—Spivey played both the naïf and the calculating businesswoman simultaneously in two January 1966 letters:¹⁵

This is the Po' Queen writing to you personally asking you to try to straighten out her royalty statements. [...] Do you know, Bob! that you never gave me a publisher's contract on [Bluesville] LP 1054 "Woman Blues", and that it is not very nice to use an artist's compositions that is fully copyrighted in Washington, D. C., selling them from North Dakota, thru [sic] Europe and even in Australia, not acknowledging her [sic] to at least half of the royalties. By the copyright department I should get all the gross royalties[,] but you know that I'm not that type of human being.¹⁶

This scolding aside, Spivey was clearly aware of the power dynamic between herself and Weinstock, the head of a record label that was, at that time, one of

¹² The record in question was *American Folk Blues Festival*, Exodus EXS-302, 33 1/3rpm.

¹³ Philips Ton Gesellschaft to Victoria Spivey, June 16, 1967.

¹⁴ Victoria Spivey to J. Binsma, May 8, 1967.

¹⁵ It is not clear which of these letters Spivey sent; both are dated the same day, although only one is signed.

¹⁶ Victoria Spivey to Bob Weinstock, January 21, 1966.

the few major labels interested in recording blues and jazz musicians of Spivey's generation. She ingratiated herself with the producer, referring to him mischievously in one letter as her "Fat Daddy [...] [who] got me started again on phonograph records"—before reminding him of her continuing availability for work. "If you need my services, I could record again for you. My asking price is \$300."¹⁷

PHOTOGRAPHS

While the correspondence in the Spivey Collection deals primarily with the "raw data" of professional music-making, Spivey's photographs offer a much more feelingful and impressionistic account of her musical life. An archive such as this one tends to require additional context or explanation to make sense of the material it contains; unless one can identify the "who," "where," or "when" of a photograph, its scholarly usefulness is limited. The photos of the Spivey Collection nonetheless fall into several broad categories, from which a number of important conclusions can be drawn. Spanning a wide chronology, the photo collection includes historic publicity photos with Lloyd Hunter's Serenaders and vaudeville entertainer Billy Adams, with whom Spivey toured in the 1930s. Photos from later in her career are more candid, often picturing Spivey socialising with other veteran musicians rather than performing; these include an intergenerational group photo of Spivey with fellow blues singers Lucille Hegamin, Hannah Sylvester, Pat Blackman, and Jackie Lynn Wilson (see fig. 2), with whom she recorded in 1962, as well as shots with Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Mississippi John Hurt. Other photos provide enticing glimpses into the interior of Spivey's various Brooklyn apartments, which she often adorned with publicity photos, records, and shots of her and other musicians, attesting to her vibrant life in show business.

¹⁷ Victoria Spivey to Bob Weinstock, January 21, 1966.



Figure 2: "Recording Session NYC, 1962," left to right: Hannah Sylvester, Pat Blackman, Victoria Spivey, Jackie Lynn Wilson, Lucille Hegamin. Victoria Spivey Collection. Box 2, folder 5. Photo by Jack Bradley © 2023 Classic Jazz Visions, Inc.

Perhaps most arresting, however, are the photos of Spivey's close family. Unlike any of the photos relating to her professional activity, which are reminiscent of published photos of Spivey and her contemporaries, her family photos offer an altogether unseen view of an early twentieth-century African American family. These photos mix archaic formality and nostalgic informality: one is a framed portrait of Spivey's sister Leona, while another features her sister Elton and her girlfriends, lying in a heap on a grass lawn sometime in the early 1920s (see fig. 3). And there is a single, poignant photo of Spivey's mother, Addie Spivey, peering out of an upstairs window of her daughter's Brooklyn apartment. Taken together, these photos show us an altogether different Spivey—a sister, a cousin, an aunt, a daughter—free from her all-consuming stage persona and regal sobriquet.



Figure 3. Elton Spivey (second from left) and friends. Moberley, Missouri, 1923. Victoria Spivey Collection. Box 2, folder 10. Courtesy of the Institute of Jazz Studies.

NON-BUSINESS PAPERS

Although the vast majority of the Spivey Collection papers relate to the singer's musical activities, some of the most arresting materials can be found in a bundle of correspondence and research files documenting a dispute over the ownership of her family home in Houston, Texas. Spivey's parents, Grant and Addie Spivey, had acquired 1614 Bonner St. around 1902;¹⁸ this was part of the Sessums Tract, an African American suburban enclave first developed by preacher John Sessums and his wife, Ann Sessums, around 1892 (see figures 4a & 4b).¹⁹

¹⁸ Jonas Ellis to Stewart Title Guaranty Company, December 29, 1964.

¹⁹ John and Ann Sessums were related to John Sessums, Jr., a noted Texas military drummer; the families of John and Ann Sessums and John Sessums, Jr. were recorded at the same address in the 1880 US Census, although it is not clear precisely what the relationship was between the two families. For more on Sessums Jr., see Ron Bass and Laurie E. Jasinski, "Sessums, John, Jr."

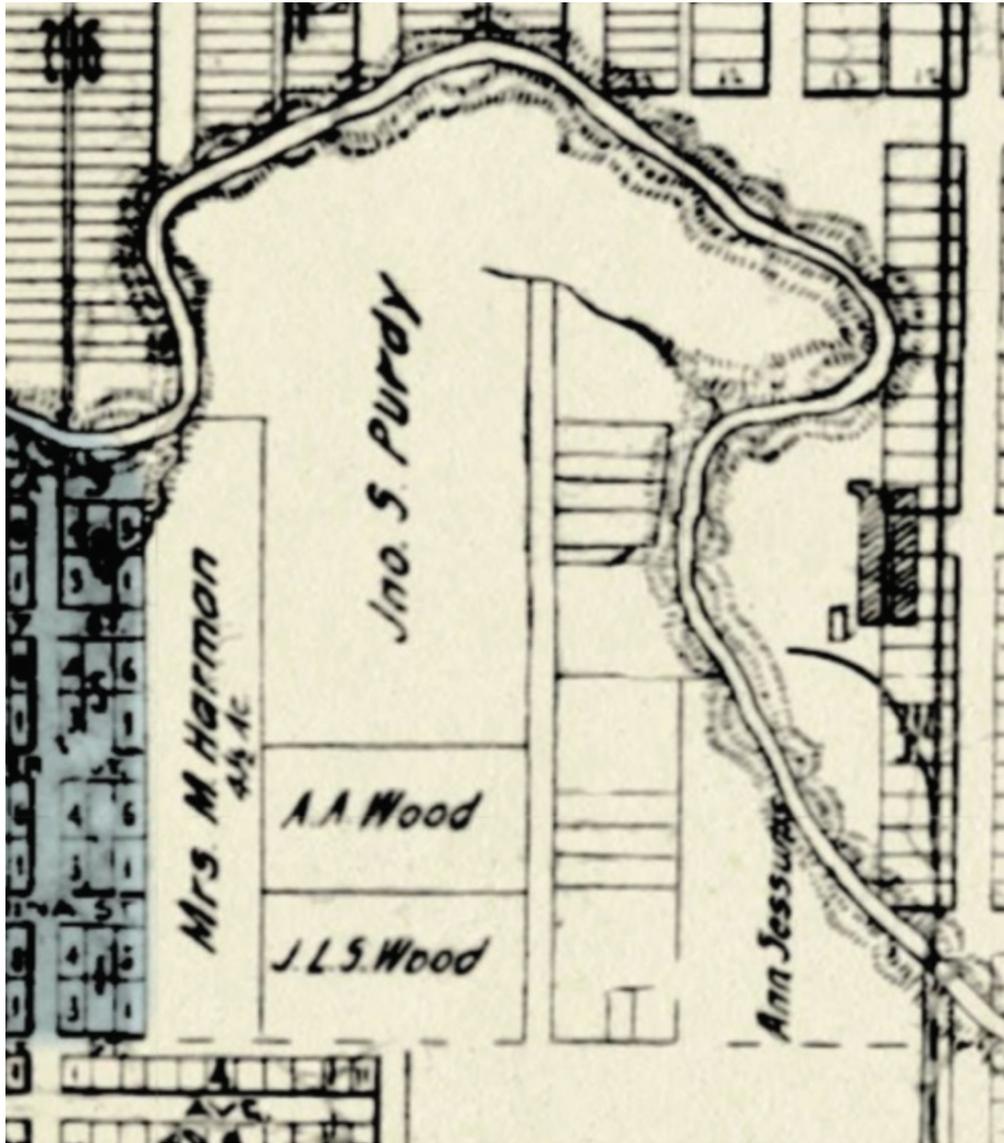


Figure 4a. Detail from Stewart Abstract & Title Co., *1907 Official Map of the City of Houston*, indicating the “Sessums Tract” belonging to Ann Sessums (right).

Handbook of Texas, accessed October 10, 2023, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/sessums-john-jr>. For a brief history of the Sessums Tract, see City of Houston Planning and Development Department, “Protected Landmark Designation Report, Phyllis Palmer and William T. Price House,” accessed October 11, 2023, https://www.houstontx.gov/planning/HistoricPres/landmarks/16PL128_1611_Bass_Pricehouse.pdf

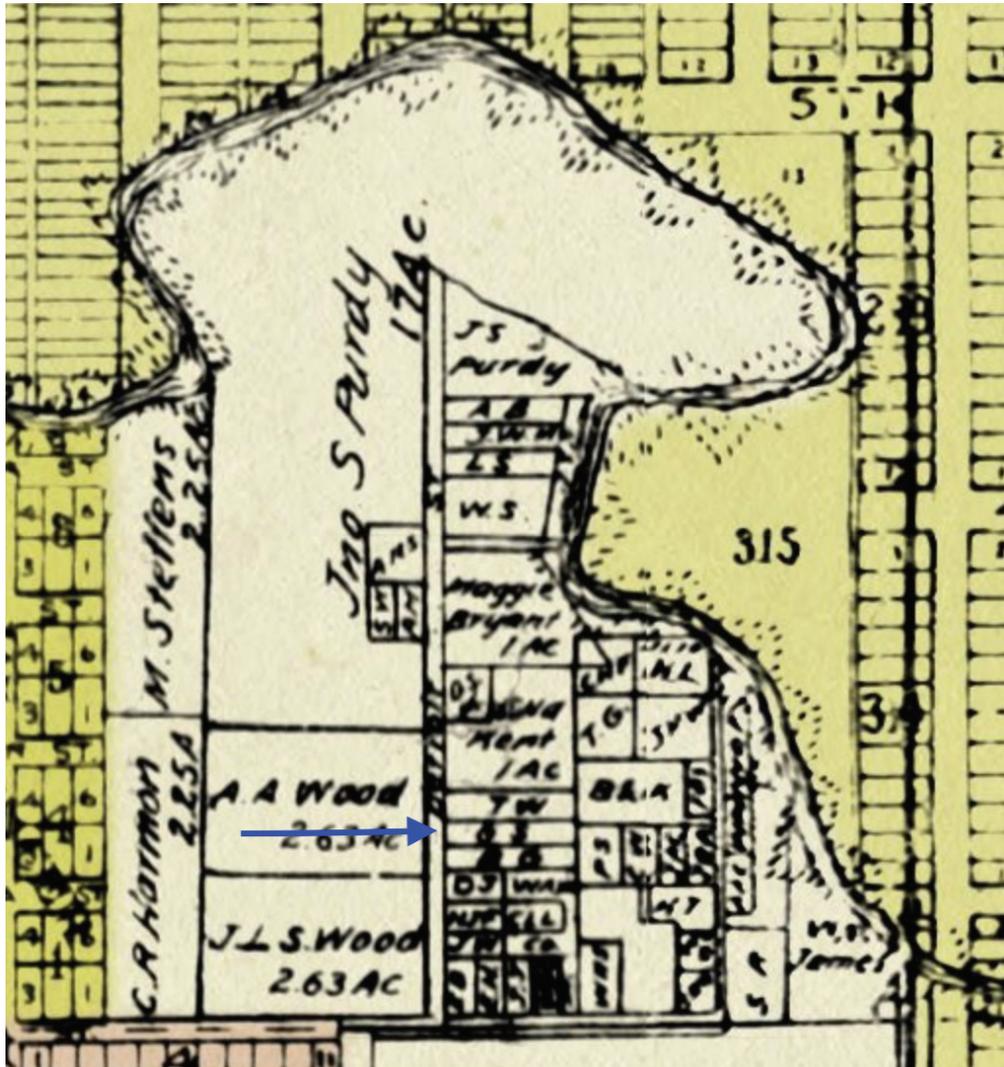


Figure 4b. Houston Title Guaranty Co., *City of Houston Texas*, 1913, indicating plots purchased in the Sessums Tract. 1614 Bonner St. (then Detroit St.) indicated with the initials "G. S." (Grant Spivey).

By Fall 1964, the Spivey home had been sold by its then owner, C. F. Beason, to the Texas Highway Department, who intended to build Interstate Highway 10 (now popularly known as the "Katy Freeway") through the middle of the neighborhood.

Following a visit to Houston in October 1964, Spivey began to attempt to rectify what she believed to have been the fraudulent sale of the house away from her family several years previously. In a letter to her New York attorney, Jonas

Ellis, Spivey accused one of her sisters-in-law of knowingly making a false affidavit in 1959 that asserted that Victoria Spivey, her sister Elton, and all her other siblings were deceased, and that Spivey's eldest brother, Willie, was the only living heir to the family home. "This was indeed bad news for my brother," Spivey wrote, "[and he] practically lost his mind over the news." Willie was "talked into" selling the property, but "was not himself when [the] transaction was made [and] he soon after passed on." Crucially, Spivey's concern was not with protecting her family home from demolition, but rather with ensuring that she and her elder sister Elton would receive what they felt they were rightfully owed:

[T]he city of Houston bought the land from [...] Beason, for \$7000. Beason and his lawyers only gave my poor brother \$2800 when he sold out, and then beat him out of most of that. This is heirs property and Elton and myself did not get a penny. It is still rightly our property. [...] I WANT THAT \$7000 for my sister and myself. [...] [The City] should pay some damages for all their mistakes including possible cause of my brother's death due to a false report of his entire family being dead.²⁰

Although some of Spivey's initial assertions were misplaced, the basics of her case were sound: in 1959, Willie Spivey had sold 1614 Bonner St. to real estate agent Barnett Magids, who in 1963 sold the property to Beason, who then sold it to the Texas Highway Department. But the conveyancers managing the 1959 sale had relied on dubious affidavits that placed Willie as the sole heir and had not found—or perhaps neglected to look for—a 1924 deed in which Addie Spivey had transferred 1614 Bonner St. to her nine children. This state of affairs, Spivey's attorney asserted, rendered Willie Spivey's sale of the property invalid, along with any subsequent transfer of ownership to the State of Texas.²¹ Magids too, it later transpired, was a gambler and a con man, and by 1966 was facing no fewer than eighteen felony charges for conveyancing fraud.²²

Taken together with Spivey's copious copyright-related correspondence, these papers reveal something of the bureaucratic burden of African American life, as individuals fought against the racist impacts of federal infrastructure and "modernisation" projects, as well as insidious attempts to deprive African

²⁰ Victoria Spivey to Jonas Ellis, November 5, 1964.

²¹ Jonas Ellis to J. W. Bartram, July 15, 1965.

²² Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Irving Resnick [Part 2 of 10]," FBI Records: The Vault, accessed October 11, 2023, <https://vault.fbi.gov/irving-resnick/>; see also John B. Patrick to William McClure, June 20, 1968.

Americans of property, whether intellectual or physical.²³ Although the discrepancies surrounding the conveyancing of 1614 Bonner St. ought to have been enough to demonstrate the veracity of her account, Highway Department administrators placed numerous obstacles in her way, continuing to require further documentary evidence of her claim, and seizing on any inconsistency they could find.²⁴ Proving either genealogy or inheritance of property was not easy, due to the inconsistency with which many Southern authorities kept records of African American citizens. “I would like to be honest with you,” Spivey wrote to John B. Patrick, her Houston attorney, in response to a request for *all* her siblings’ birth and death certificates:

During the time of our births Negroes [sic] were mostly brought into this world by midwives and sometimes by Doctors and their births were rarely registered in City Hall. [...] There may have been certificates for my [brother] Willie, Leona, Sam and Elton, who were all born in Galveston but that 1900 storm must have washed everything out to the Gulf of Mexico. I was told that the only thing left standing was the firehouse.²⁵

Despite these barriers, Spivey was assiduous in her efforts: letters from the Highway Department refuting her claims are annotated in Spivey’s hand with her own rebuttals, and it is evident that at one point she even wrote to President Lyndon Johnson to engage federal assistance in her case.²⁶

Ultimately, Spivey faced an uphill battle. The new ten-lane section of the highway opened on December 20, 1968,²⁷ obliterating 1614 Bonner St. along with numerous other African American-owned properties that lay in the road’s path (see figure 5). Dissatisfied with the Texas Highway Department’s

²³ For more on the racial impacts of highway building, see Liam Dillon and Ben Poston, “The Racist History of America’s Interstate Highway Boom,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 11, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/homeless-housing/story/2021-11-11/the-racist-history-of-americas-interstate-highway-boom>.

²⁴ William McClure to Jonas Ellis, November 30, 1964; A. C. Keyser to Victoria Spivey, February 28, 1967; William McClure to John B. Patrick, May 7, 1968.

²⁵ Victoria Spivey to John B. Patrick, 1 December 1967. The storm that Spivey is referring to here is the 1900 Galveston Hurricane; killing over 8,000 people and displacing more than a quarter of the city’s population at the time, the storm remains the deadliest natural disaster on record in US history.

²⁶ Joseph M. O’Connor to Victoria Spivey, August 22, 1968. The Federal Highways Administration did send an agent to meet with Spivey and discuss her claim, but withdrew its involvement after confirming Spivey’s intention to take action against the State of Texas.

²⁷ “Katy Freeway Opens (1968),” Texas Archive of the Moving Image, accessed October 10, 2023, https://texasarchive.org/2018_00419.

intransigence, Spivey attempted to sue the state for damages, an action that required permission from the state legislature.²⁸



Figure 5. Bonner St. and Interstate 10 Highway, 2022. The final house pictured is 1612 Bonner; Spivey's family home at 1614 Bonner stood beyond this, directly in the path of the highway. Image: Google © 2022

Despite appealing personally to State Senator Barbara Jordan—the legislature's first African American member since the Reconstruction period—Spivey was unsuccessful: by March 1970 her resolution had still not been heard, and Patrick reluctantly closed her case two years later.²⁹

²⁸ John B. Patrick to Victoria Spivey, December 4, 1968.

²⁹ Patrick to Spivey, March 5, 1970; Patrick to Spivey, February 7, 1972.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the Spivey Collection has neither the scope or internal comprehensiveness of some of the larger individual artist collections in the IJS archives. There is a frequent sense that there must be “more” material gathered elsewhere, and it is likely that the IJS’s Len Kunststadt Collection, as well as a separate collection relating to Victoria Spivey housed at Emory University might address these gaps.³⁰ Even so, the collection is distinguished by the range of material contained within it, together with its rarity as a publicly available archive collection relating to a blues musician. The collection provides crucial insight into the creative, financial, political, and personal challenges that Spivey and many other African American musicians faced. Yet Spivey’s passion for the music and those who made it permeates the archive, as does her determination to tackle these many challenges head on.

³⁰ “Victoria Spivey Papers,” Emory University Libraries, accessed October 11, 2023, <https://archives.libraries.emory.edu/repositories/7/resources/3405>.

A SUPPLEMENTARY BIBLIOGRAPHY OF CRITICAL WRITING BY OR INVOLVING
VICTORIA SPIVEY, 1956-1975

Most jazz critics have been white Americans, but most important jazz musicians have not been.³¹

As early as 1963, the African American playwright and essayist Amiri Baraka identified a racialised division of labor in Black music historiography that has persisted into the present day. Even as universities, academic and popular journals, and the media have become ever more amenable to jazz as a subject of serious study and debate, the bulk of writing about this music and its creators has been authored by white academics, researchers, and essayists.³² Yet, as Daphne Brooks has recently pointed out, African American women musicians have often been thoroughly engaged in the intellectual life of their musical worlds, and have constantly sought to blur the lines between *making* music, and talking, thinking, and writing about it.³³ Victoria Spivey was no exception: as the partner of discographer and magazine editor Len Kunststadt, Spivey contributed to his magazine, *Record Research*, and actively participated in the otherwise all-white, predominantly-male record collecting fraternity that made up the magazine's staff and primary audience.

This bibliography supplements existing bibliographic research on Spivey as a subject of jazz and blues criticism by assembling a comprehensive list of written criticism that Spivey either authored or contributed to in some way. In preparing this bibliography, I have drawn on the following existing bibliographic reference works: Robert Ford's *A Blues Bibliography*, the RIPM Jazz Periodicals database, the Jazzinstitut Darmstadt Jazz Index database, and Mary Katherine Aldin's *Blues Magazine Selective Index*. Each of these sources is incomplete in their coverage of Spivey's own writings, however; they do not attend to Spivey's inconsistent use of column titles and subtitles, and they omit instances where Spivey contributed to articles by other authors. The remainder of my references have been compiled through a manual search of the magazine *Record Research*, which is held in digital form on the Internet Archive website.

The bibliography is ordered chronologically, as this offers easy cross-referencing of Spivey's writings with her other professional activities. In a

³¹ LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), "Jazz and the White Critic," in *Black Music* (New York: Morrow, 1967), 11.

³² For a comprehensive discussion of this tendency, see Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., "Who Hears Here? Black Music, Critical Bias, and the Musicological Skin Trade," in *Who Hears Here? On Black Music, Past and Present* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), 43-89.

³³ Daphne A. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2021).

departure from *Chicago Manual of Style* guidelines, I have retained issue numbers (where available) and page numbers in citations of magazine and newspaper sources, in order to aid future researchers. Annotations indicate whether Spivey is the author [A] of a piece, a contributing author [CA] of a piece otherwise attributed to someone else, or an interviewee [I]. Where the topic of a piece is not evident from its title, I have provided a short description of its contents in *italics*.

PRE-1945

Jessye, Eva. "Girl Movie Star Attributes Her Success to Hard Work." *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 27, 1929, 8. [I]

1956-1961

Sheer, Anita, Len Kunstadt, Harrison Smith, and Bob Colton. "The Story of Victoria Spivey." *Record Research* 8, May-June 1956, 3-6, 16. [I]

Kunstadt, Leonard. "Filling in Discographically." *Record Research* [11], January-February 1957, 23. [I] - *Spivey's recollections inform Kunstadt's discographical addenda.*

Kunstadt, Len. "The Lucille Hegamin Story, with an introduction by Victoria Spivey." *Record Research* 39, November 1961, 2-7. [CA]

1962

Rotante, Anthony, and Marcel Chauvard. "Memphis Slim - Peter Chatman Revised Discography." *Record Research* 40, January 1962, 12. [CA] - *Spivey's recollections inform Rotante and Chauvard's discographical research.*

Spivey, Victoria. "Blues Is My Business." *Record Research* 41, February 1962, 8. [A] - *Spivey introduces her new column, and invites correspondence.*

Spivey, Victoria. "Blues Is My Business." *Record Research* 43, May 1962, 10. [A] - *On her recent correspondence, Sadie McKinney, and Big Joe Williams.*

Spivey, Victoria. "Speaking about My Friend, Bessie Smith." *Blues Is My Business. Record Research* 44, July 1962, 7. [A]

Spivey, Victoria. "Buddy Tate and His Family Sure Been Good to Me." *Blues Is My Business*. *Record Research* 45, August 1962, 8, 12. [A]

Spivey, Victoria. "Blues Is My Business." *Record Research* 46, October 1962, 12, 20. [A] - *On Hannah Sylvester and the X-Glamor Girls*

Spivey, Victoria. "Chords and Discords: Miss Spivey Speaks Her Mind." *Down Beat* 29, no. 27 (25 Oct 1962), 8, 9. [A] - *A letter, in which Spivey responds to a review of her album Songs We Taught Your Mother.*

Spivey, Victoria. "My Play Brother Hot Lip Page." *Blues Is My Business*. *Record Research* [47], November 1962, 12. [A] - *On jazz trumpeter Oran "Hot Lips" Page,*

1963

Spivey, Victoria. "The Louis Armstrong that I Know." *Record Research* 48, January 1963, 3, 19. [A]

Spivey, Victoria. "He is the Man." *Blues Is My Business*. *Record Research* 49, March 1963, 11. [A] - *On booking agent Joe Glaser.*

Spivey, Victoria. "Red Allen - A Wonderful Fellow." *Record Research* 50, April 1963, 12. [A]

Spivey, Victoria. "Blues Is My Business." *Record Research* 53, July 1963, 12. [A] - *On the authorship of the song "T. B. Blues."*

Spivey, Victoria. "Blues Is My Business." *Record Research* 54, August 1963, 20. [A] - *On the Even Dozen Jazz Band.*

Spivey, Victoria. "Blues Is My Business." *Record Research* 55, September 1963, 12. [A] - *On Conrad Janis, Rudi Blesh, a benefit concert for the widow of Jelly Roll Morton.*

Spivey, Victoria. "Blues Is My Business." *Record Research* 56, November 1963, 5. [A] - *On her experiences of the American Folk Blues Festival European tour.*

Atterton, Jeff, Mike Zaccagnino, and Victoria Spivey. "In Memory of Jack Crystal." *Record Research* 56, November 1963, 14. [CA]

1964

Spivey, Victoria. "I Knew Mamie Smith." *Record Research* 57, January 1964, 7. [A]

Kunstadt, Len. "Mamie Smith - A Further Report." *Record Research* 58, February 1964, 9, 20. [CA] - *On Spivey and Kunstadt's fundraising for Mamie Smith's headstone.*

Spivey, Victoria. "Blues Is My Business." *Record Research* 60, May-June 1964, 14. [A] - *On bandleader Luis Russell.*

Kunstadt, Len, and Victoria Spivey. "The Newport Jazz Festival '64." *Record Research* 62, August 1964, 3-4, 9. [CA]

Kunstadt, Len, and Victoria Spivey. "The Blues and Gospel Came to Newport." *Record Research* 63, September 1964, 1-5. [CA]

Spivey, Victoria. "A Rising Star: Maria D'Amato." *Blues Is My Business. Record Research* 63, September 1964, 5. [A]

Spivey, Victoria. "Looking Back..." *Blues Is My Business. Record Research* 64, November 1964, 7. [A] - *On Memphis Minnie and Koko Taylor.*

Spivey, Victoria. "Just Thinking About the Original Corinne, Corinna." *Blues Is My Business. Record Research* 65, December 1964, 10. [A] - *On the history of the folksong "Corinne, Corinna."*

1965

Spivey, Victoria "Blues Is My Business." *Record Research* 66, February 1965, 5, 9. [A] - *On Stompin' George McClellon, and Billy Adams.*

Godrich, John. "Victoria Spivey." *Blues Unlimited* 19, February 1965, 5-6. [CA/I] - *Extracts from recorded interviews and correspondence between Godrich and Spivey.*

Godrich, John. "Victoria Spivey (Postscript)." *Blues Unlimited* 20, March 1965, 10. [CA/I] - *A futher letter from Spivey to Godrich.*

Spivey, Victoria. "Blues Is My Business." *Record Research* 67, April 1965, 11. [A]
- *On Bob Dylan.*

Spivey, Victoria. "Spivey Records." *Blues Is My Business. Record Research* 68,
May 1965, 6. [A]

Spivey, Victoria. "Sippie Wallace Sings Better than Ever." *Blues Is My Business.*
Record Research 69, July 1965, 1, 7. [A]

Spivey, Victoria. "A Photo is Worth a Thousand Words." *Blues Is My Business.*
Record Research 70, August 1965, 9, 10. [A] - *On her recent album Three
Kings And The Queen; recording with Memphis Slim.*

Spivey, Victoria. "John Hammond Jr." *Blues Is My Business. Record Research* 72,
November 1965, 9. [A] - *On jamming with Hammond, Babe Stovall, and
recollections of Blind Lemon Jefferson.*

1966

Spivey, Victoria. "Gertrude Saunders: Still A Red Hot Mama – Introduction." *Record Research* 74,
March 1966, 2-3. [CA]

Kunstadt, Len. "Rosa Henderson: Yesterday and Today." *Record Research* 75,
April 1966, 3. [CA]

Spivey, Victoria. "Blind Lemon and I Had A Ball." *Record Research* 76, May
1966, 9. [A] - *On her acquaintance with Blind Lemon Jefferson.*

Spivey, Victoria. "My Porter Grainger." *Record Research* 79, October 1966, 8.
[A]

1967

Spivey, Victoria. "Robert Shaw." *Blues Is My Business. Record Research* 81,
January 1967, 7. [A]

Spivey, Victoria. "The King and I." *Record Research* 87, December 1967, 3. - *On
Joe "King" Oliver.*

1968

Spivey, Victoria. "It Seems Just Like Yesterday Just a Year Ago – Newport Jazz Festival." *Record Research* 91, July 1968, 3. [A]

1969

Spivey, Victoria. "A Vignette on Joan Crawford." *Record Research* 99, July 1969, 7. [A]

Spivey, Victoria. "'She Was My Baby Even If She Was My Sister': The Coming of Sweet Peas." *Blues Is My Business*. *Record Research* 102, November 1969, 6. [A] - *On Addie "Sweet Peas" Spivey*.

1970-1975

Spivey, Victoria. "Lost! Two of the Best Buddies I Ever Had..." *Blues Is My Business*. *Record Research* [106], July 1970, 9. [A] - *On the deaths of Lonnie Johnson and Otis Spann*.

Wilmer, Val. "Val Wilmer Talks to the Grand Old Lady of the Blues." *Melody Maker*, September 13, 1975, 38. [I] - *Wilmer interviews Spivey*.

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