

APOLLO

EDUCATION

THE APOLLO THEATER STUDY GUIDE

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STRING STORIES



*Sister Rosetta Tharpe
Cover photo: Odetta*

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BLUES

The roots of the Blues date back to the Civil War, to a time when millions of African Americans were enslaved and forced to work on plantations in the South.

In order to communicate without plantation owners knowing, slaves had to develop resourceful methods for sharing information. One of those methods was to conceal messages in the stories they told, as well as the **work songs and spirituals** they sang.

Following the Civil War, African Americans in the Mississippi Delta continued the musical traditions of their ancestors, which included singing and playing instruments such as the **banjo and acoustic guitar**. By the late 1800s, the **“blue notes” and call and response patterns** heard in work songs and spirituals, evolved into one of the earliest known styles of the Blues, called **Delta Blues**.

As performers traveled outside of the Delta during the **Great Migration**, they brought their songs and stories with them. In cities like

Memphis, Tennessee and St. Louis, Missouri, the music developed its distinctive **“12 bar blues” form**, and grew in popularity.

In the Piedmont region along the Eastern Seaboard, musicians developed their own technical style of guitar playing in the 1920s, called **Piedmont Blues**. Following the invention of the electric guitar in 1931, guitarists in Chicago revolutionized the Blues during the 1950s, plugging in to amplifiers and belting out their electrified style, called **Chicago Blues**.

Since emerging in the Mississippi Delta over a century ago, multiple styles of the Blues have developed. In turn, those styles have influenced the development of Jazz, Country, Gospel, Rhythm and Blues, Rock and Roll, and more.

Today, the Blues continue to influence musicians and inspire audiences around the world. Like the Apollo Theater, the music and its history will forever be rooted in the soul of American culture.

WORDS TO KNOW

Blue notes: Expressive pitches that musicians bend up and down to create a longing effect.

Blues Shouters: Powerful vocalists who can sing over a band without the use of a microphone.

Call and response patterns: Similar to a conversation, musicians perform “calls” for fellow musicians or audiences to “respond” to.

Country Music: Rural style of folk music, emerging in Eastern Tennessee in the 1920s.

Gospel Music: A style of Christian music, modernized and becoming popular in African American church communities in the 1940s.

Jazz: Early musical style to evolve out of the Blues, emerging in New Orleans in the early 1900s.

Race Music: A controversial label for black music used during the first half of the 20th century.

Rhythm and Blues (R&B): A direct descendant of the Blues, becoming popular in the 1940s

Rock and Roll: A direct descendant of Rhythm and Blues, becoming popular in the 1950s.

Shuffle rhythm: The heartbeat of the Blues.

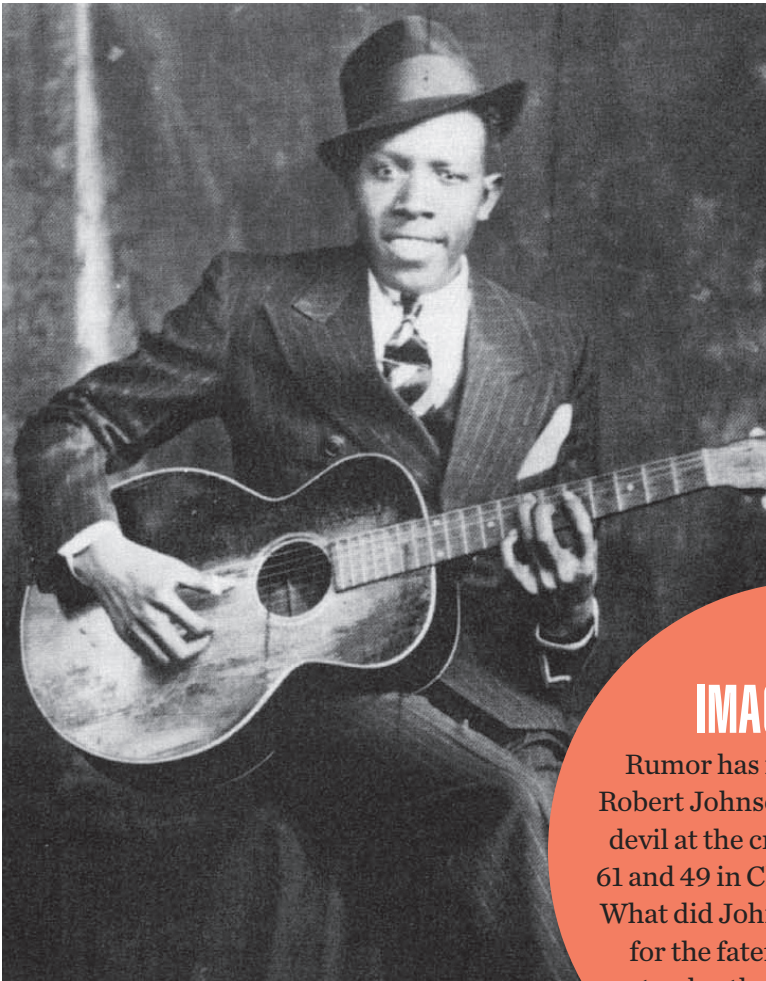
Spirituals: Religious songs strongly associated with the African American experience.

Swing Music: Popular style of Jazz music, emerging in Chicago and New York in the 1920s.

Work Songs: Songs sung and performed in rhythm that accompany work related activities.



THE ROOTS AND FRUITS OF THE BLUES



IMAGINE THIS:

Rumor has it that Blues Legend Robert Johnson, sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads of Highway 61 and 49 in Clarksdale, Mississippi. What did Johnson receive in return for the fateful deal? The ability to play the guitar better than anyone in the world!

What makes the Blues such an expressive and powerful music? Listen closely and you're likely to hear the following musical elements:

"Blue notes" are expressive pitches that musicians bend up and down on their instruments (or when they sing) to produce a longing effect. Oftentimes, this effect is referred to as sounding "bluesy."

Listen to Odetta bend notes up and down with her voice and make them sound "bluesy," in her performance of ["This Little Light of Mine."](#)

The **shuffle rhythm** is the heartbeat of the Blues. Think about the sound of your own heartbeat: *"Boom. Boomba. Boom. Boomba. Boom."* Believe it or not, our heartbeats sound similar to the shuffle rhythm! Another example is the sound of a train chugging along the tracks. *"Chugga. Chugga. Chugga. Chugga."*

Listen to ["Up Above My Head"](#) by Sister Rosetta Tharpe and feel the shuffling rhythm.

The **"12 bar blues"** is a musical structure that typically consists of just three chords organized over 12 measures, or bars. It has become one of the most popular song forms in all of American music, and was widely adopted in styles such as Jazz, Rhythm & Blues, and Rock and Roll.

Listen to Memphis Minnie following the "12 bar blues" form on ["When The Levee Breaks"](#).

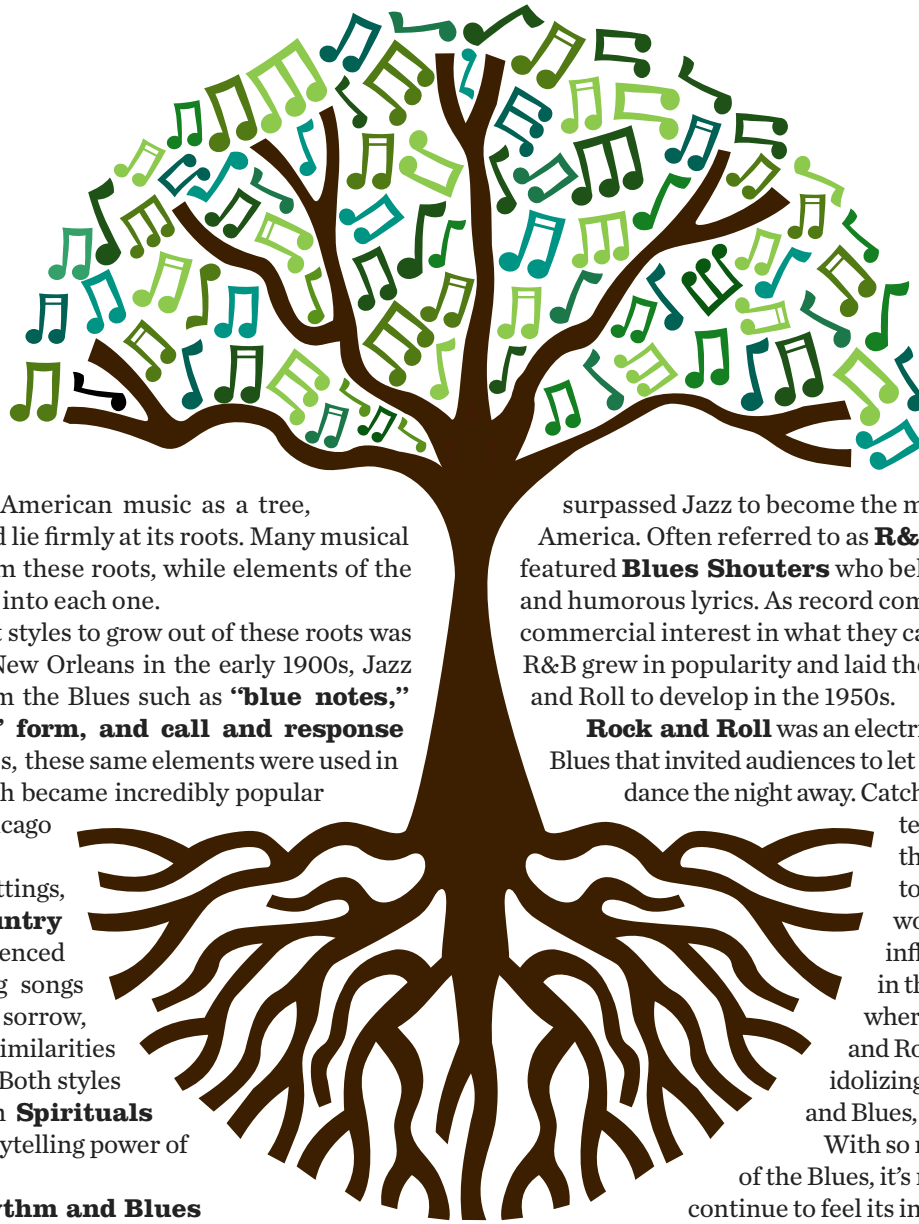
Finally, go back and listen to ["When The Levee Breaks"](#) one more time. Can you hear the **call and response pattern** in Memphis Minnie's lyrics? After a lyrical phrase is "called" out in the first four bars, she repeats the phrase in the second four bars, then sings a different phrase in "response" during the last four bars. Blues melodies and song lyrics are often structured around this call-call-response (or same-same-different) pattern.



Top: Robert Johnson;
bottom: Memphis Minnie
album cover

“The Blues is the roots; everything else is the fruits.”

—Willie Dixon



If you think of American music as a tree, the Blues would lie firmly at its roots. Many musical styles grew from these roots, while elements of the Blues were integrated into each one.

One of the earliest styles to grow out of these roots was **Jazz**. Developing in New Orleans in the early 1900s, Jazz adopted elements from the Blues such as “blue notes,” the “12 bar blues” form, and call and response patterns. In the 1920s, these same elements were used in **Swing Music**, which became incredibly popular in big cities like Chicago and New York.

In more rural settings, early pioneers of **Country Music** were also influenced by the Blues. Writing songs about overcoming sorrow, Country shared many similarities with **Gospel Music**. Both styles drew inspiration from **Spirituals** and expressed the storytelling power of the Blues.

In the 1940s, **Rhythm and Blues**

surpassed Jazz to become the most popular music in America. Often referred to as **R&B**, the exciting style featured **Blues Shouters** who belted out entertaining and humorous lyrics. As record companies learned of the commercial interest in what they called “**Race Music**,” R&B grew in popularity and laid the groundwork for Rock and Roll to develop in the 1950s.

Rock and Roll was an electric extension of the Blues that invited audiences to let their hair down and dance the night away. Catching on with young

teenagers in America, the music quickly spread to audiences around the world. Nowhere was its influence felt more than in the United Kingdom, where bands like the Beatles and Rolling Stones grew up idolizing Rock and Roll, Rhythm and Blues, and Blues artists.

With so many styles growing out of the Blues, it's no wonder audiences continue to feel its influence today.

DO NOW: TELL YOUR STORY, SING YOUR SONG

The Blues allow performers the opportunity to tell their story and express themselves. Using the musical elements learned in this guide, express your story by composing a “**12 bar blues**” using the simple **call-call-response pattern**.

A common storyline in the Blues is that someone is confronted with a problem that they don't want to face. Addressing their concern in the first

four bars of the “12 bar blues” form, the performer repeats their phrase in the second four bars, then follows both “calls” with a “response” that offers a solution to their problem.

For example:

Have you heard the news?

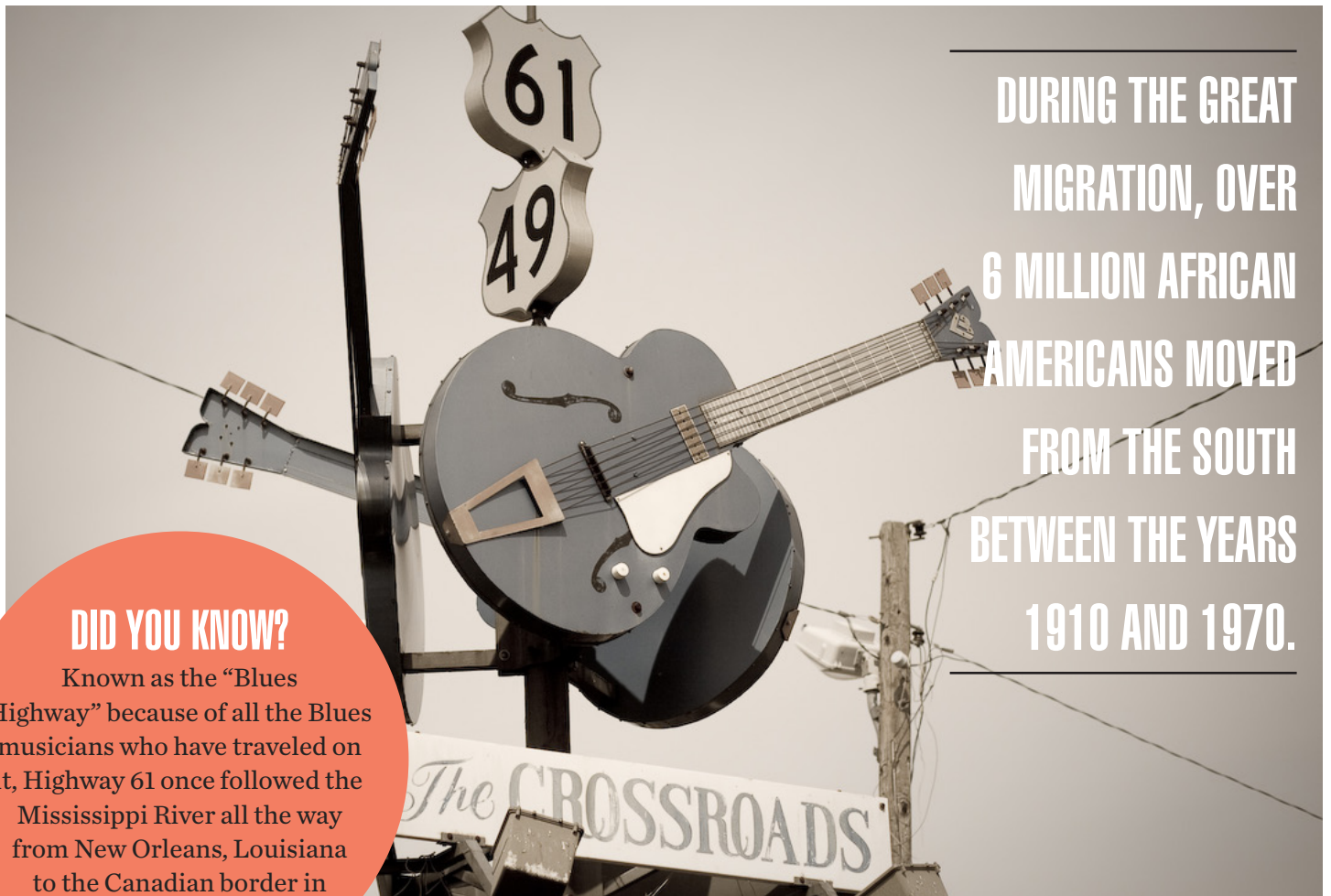
I got the alarm clock blues.

Have you heard the news?

I got the alarm clock blues.

*I'm feeling so awfully blue! I think
I'll have to hit the snooze.*

Now tell your story and compose your own “12 bar blues” using the call-call response pattern. For a truly “bluesy” feel, sing your lyrics using “**blue notes**” while feeling the **shuffle rhythm**!



DURING THE GREAT
MIGRATION, OVER
6 MILLION AFRICAN
AMERICANS MOVED
FROM THE SOUTH
BETWEEN THE YEARS
1910 AND 1970.

DID YOU KNOW?

Known as the “Blues Highway” because of all the Blues musicians who have traveled on it, Highway 61 once followed the Mississippi River all the way from New Orleans, Louisiana to the Canadian border in northern Minnesota!

TRAVELING BLUES:

HOW THE GREAT MIGRATION INFLUENCED THE SOUND OF THE BLUES

For over a century, Bluesmen and women have been criss-crossing the United States telling their stories and sharing their songs. Traveling by foot, river boat, train, plane, or automobile, the Blues have spread to every corner of the country, thanks largely in part to the **Great Migration**.

Between 1910 and 1970, more than 6 million African Americans moved out of the rural South, seeking employment opportunities and refuge from racial discrimination. With many people moving to the North, the Great Migration brought the Blues out of the Mississippi Delta and into some of the nation’s most bustling industrial cities.

In the early 1900s, historic travel routes such as Highway 61, known as the “Blues Highway,” transported musicians from the Mississippi Delta to cities like Memphis, Tennessee and St. Louis, Missouri. Sharing their songs and stories everywhere they went, **Delta Blues** musicians set the tone for all other styles of Blues to develop.

On the East Coast in the 1920s, musicians from the mountainous Piedmont region near Virginia and the Carolinas

migrated to industrial areas such as Atlanta, Georgia. There they introduced a technical guitar style called **Piedmont Blues**, which required performers to play fast and rhythmically.

To the West the Blues spread to Texas. In Houston, the swinging sound of **Texas Blues** poured out of dance halls in the 1930s. Meanwhile in Dallas, figures like T-Bone Walker became one of the first to play and record the Blues on electric guitar. Moving to Los Angeles in the 1940s, Walker also helped establish the jazz-influenced **West Coast Blues** style.

In the Midwest, musicians in Chicago, Illinois fully electrified the Blues in the 1950s. Playing in clubs that were loud and lively, they had to plug their instruments into amplifiers in order to be heard. **Chicago Blues** musicians laid the groundwork for Rock and Roll to develop in the 1950s, a cultural phenomenon that introduced the Blues to audiences around the world.

By the end of the Great Migration, the Blues had traveled throughout the United States and beyond. Today, its journey continues to connect listeners using modern technologies such as the internet, the ultimate information highway.

STRING STORIES: THE GUITAR

There is one instrument more closely tied to the roots (*and fruits*) of the Blues than any other: the guitar.

With its origins dating back to Spain in the late 1700s, the **acoustic guitar** first arrived in the U.S. in the mid-1800s. Intended primarily for European Classical music, African Americans in the Mississippi Delta took a different approach to playing the instrument.

Incorporating musical characteristics such as “**blue notes**” and **shuffling rhythms**, musicians in the Delta were influenced by the musical traditions of their ancestors, many being of West African descent. In West African countries such as Senegal, musicians had been performing on stringed instruments similar to the guitar for centuries, including the **kora**, **akonting**, and **banjo**.

The lush sound of the **kora** is produced by plucking its 21 strings much like a harp, while its long neck and rounded body resemble a guitar. The instrument was often performed



Kora

by **African Griots**, who were cultural historians responsible for teaching music and storytelling traditions to younger generations.

Also in West Africa, the three-stringed **akonting** served an important role during social gatherings such as dances. Akonting players could be very expressive in the way they bent and slid their fingers over the instrument's strings, creating exciting rhythms that were inviting to dance to.

Both the kora and akonting are close musical ancestors to the **banjo**, which in its earliest form, was similarly constructed from a hollowed out gourd, wooden stick neck, and animal skin. It was brought to the United States by enslaved Africans, who over time, modified the instrument to become the metal-bodied 5-string banjo we commonly see today.

Influenced by the musical traditions of their West African ancestors, both the banjo and acoustic guitar were adopted by African American musicians in the U.S. South. While the origins and evolution of each instrument date back centuries, their stories will continue to string listeners along for centuries to come.

ELIZABETH COTTEN AND HER UPSIDE DOWN GUITAR

Born in 1895 in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Elizabeth Cotten taught herself to play the banjo as a young girl and soon learned how to play the guitar. This was a somewhat risky endeavor as the guitar belonged to her brother and he would not allow her to touch it. So young Elizabeth would wait until he left, grab the guitar from beneath his bed, and slide it across her lap to play. Eventually, she bought her own guitar for \$3.75.

Nicknamed “Libba”, Cotten was left-handed. Since guitar then were made to accommodate right-handed people, she held the guitar



opposite from how it is usually played, using her right hand to fret the strings and strumming the guitar with her left thumb and fingers. She developed a

style of playing that was so distinct that people referred to it as “Cotten picking.”

When Cotten was 12, she wrote her first song about a freight train that crossed through the town where she lived and kept her awake at night. The song, “Freight Train,” was recorded in 1957, when Cotten was 62 years old. Over the years numerous musicians have recorded their versions of the song, a fitting tribute to Cotten's influence on music.

Cotten recorded three more albums, received a Grammy Award, and, in 1984, was recognized as a National Heritage Fellow by the National Endowment for the Arts. [Watch Elizabeth Cotten perform Freight Train.](#)

MAPPING THE BLUES

Delta Blues: One of the earliest style of the Blues, emerging in the Mississippi Delta in the late 1800s.

Piedmont Blues: Technical style of guitar playing, emerging in the Southeast in the 1920s.

Texas Blues: Swinging style of Blues, emerging in Texas in the 1930s.

West Coast Blues: Jazz-influenced style of Blues, emerging on the West Coast in the 1940s.

Chicago Blues: Electric style of Blues, emerging in Chicago in the 1950s.

ACROSS

- 3: This style of Blues emerged in the 1950s
5: A style of Jazz that emerged in Chicago and New York in the 1920s
6: Three-stringed instrument from West Africa
7: Shuffle _____
8: A style of guitar playing that emerged in the Southeast in the 1920s
10: These are sung in rhythm along with work related activities

DOWN

- 1: This involved more than 6 million African Americans leaving the South between 1910 and 1970
2: _____ Minnie
4: Nickname for Elizabeth Cotten
5: Religious songs associated with the African American experience
7: Call and _____
9: One of the earliest styles of the Blues was from this region
11: Instrument with 21 strings

ANSWERS

10: Worksongs
8: Piedmont Blues
7: Rhythm
6: Akonting
5: Swing Music
3: Chicago Blues
1: The Great Migration
2: Memphis
4: Libba
5: Spirituals
7: Response

DOWN

ACROSS

Published by the Apollo Theater
Education Program

Apollo Theater Education Staff

Shirley C. Taylor
Director of Education
Debbie Ardemento
Associate Director of Education
Jason Steer
Education Manager
Princess Belton
Education Coordinator
Yanira Gonzalez
Education Coordinator
Chinai Hardy
Education Associate

Credits

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Written by: Tim Sullivan
Contributor: LaFrae Sci
Design: Van Gennep Design
"String Stories: The Blueswomen" Digital
Resource Guide created by DaMonique Ballou

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SG, 1964, Open Pics
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Memphis Minnie, "In My Girlish Days",
album cover
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