TRACK NO.

5

MATTIE DELANEY

SONG

"Tallahatchie River Blues"

WRITTEN BY:
Mattie Delaney
CREDITED MUSICIANS:
Mattie Delaney (vocals, guitar)
FROM:
Mississippi Masters: Early American Blues Classics, 1927–1935 (Yazoo, 1994); originally released as a 78 on Vocalion 1480 (1930)
PUBLISHER:
Madison Leisure Corporation *dba* Boot House of Tunes
COURTESY OF:
Shanachie Entertainment and Madison Leisure Corporation
SPECIAL THANKS:
Jury Krytiuk, Randall Grass, Gary Atkinson, and Gillian Atkinson

To hear Mattie Delaney's other song, and to read Jonathan Rabb and Beth Ann Fennelly on Mattie and Mississippi flood music, please visit ***oxfordamerican.org.***

ROCK OF WATERS.
BY SANDRA BEASLEY

The first thing you notice about "Tallahatchie River Blues," one of only two known songs recorded by Mississippi's Mattie Delaney, is her guitar's canter: precise, polished, and loping. Her tone teeters between urgency and surrender. It's as if she knows her melody has places to go, but is unsure if hurrying there will do any good.

The river is rising, she announces in a clear voice. She does not presume the bright high notes of Mamie Smith, the swagger of Ma Rainey, or the seductive intonation of Rosa Henderson; only on the extended vowels does her vibrato power through. She is not here to shimmy through a verse or play a hokum word game. She is here to report. "Some people in the Delta," she sings, "wondering what to do." She repeats the line. "[If] they don't build some levees/I don't know what become of you."

"Tallahatchie" is Choctaw for "rock of waters." Many people know the name purely in terms of Billie Joe's fictional suicide or the very real murder of Emmett Till. Until the 1936 Flood Control Act led to the construction of a dam near Sardis (completed in 1940), the flooding of the river was frequent and vicious. This song was recorded in 1930.

Like most blues, the tension boils down to fight or flight. "I got to go," the lyric observes, "and leave my daddy behind." An instrumental break follows, as if giving the singer time to reconsider. "Lord, this water is rising," she says, "and I sure can't swim..../Going to pack my suitcase/Go back to Tennessee."

Wait. *Back* to Tennessee?

Some might use this line to argue that Mattie Delaney spent her career in Memphis. But the lyric "I'm gonna pack my suitcase/Beat it back to Tennessee" also appears in King Solomon Hill's song "Tell Me Baby." That song reworks Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe's "What Fault You Find of Me? (Parts I & II)." Perhaps this "clue" is just a nod of authorship passed down from Memphis Minnie to Mississippi Mattie.

Granted, "Tell Me Baby" was not recorded by Paramount until 1932. But King Solomon Hill—real name Joe Holmes—was born in 1897 in McComb, Mississippi, part of a generation that included Charlie Patton, Willie Brown, and Tommy Johnson. The latter trio defined "Drew-style" blues via their crossing of paths at the Dockery Plantation near Drew, Mississippi. Mattie Delaney's other recorded song, "Down the Big Road Blues," plays on Johnson's "Big Road Blues." It's not hard to imagine Holmes was another real-time influence on Delaney.

It's not hard to imagine a lot of things. Without a surviving birth certificate, we haven't been left with much to go on to decipher Delaney's biography.

We know that she laid down two tracks at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis for Vocalion Records in February 1930: No. 1480 at 78 rpm, part of the "race records" 1000 series recorded by and marketed to African Americans. And we know she was a woman who played her own guitar, rare in the day—one reason why contemporary iconoclasts like Rory Block and Lucinda Williams have since covered her two songs.

Everything else we claim about this distinct, plaintive talent has to be logical deduction. Conjecture. Academic headbutting. Or witchcraft.

But days have been spent on lesser motives. So for a week after I first hear "Tallahatchie River Blues," I think, *I'm going to find her. The real Mattie.*

Delaney was likely born in 1905 as Mattie Doyle in Tchula, Mississippi. So sayeth Wikipedia, divine oracle of students everywhere. I trace this "fact" to an assertion made in *King of the Delta Blues: The Life and Music of Charlie Patton*, a book coauthored by Stephen Calt and Gayle Dean Wardlow. Wardlow is a prominent blues historian, and the oral histories he gathered provide the primary sources for many opinions and theories in the field. (Wardlow is also impossible not to like. In an essay on his door-to-door hunt for original recordings—including the first known copy of "Tallahatchie River Blues"—he says, "I had the best luck with older women who had flower pots on the porch.")

Art by Aron Wiesenfeld.

Wardlow's audio logs lay the groundwork for the Doyle identity. From Henry Austin's memories about hearing Bo Weavil Jackson in juke joints, Wardlow gleans an aside placing Delaney in a joint at Swan Lake. A woman named Lilly Berry chimes in: She says Delaney is a cousin who was born south of Tchula and was known as Mattie Doyle before moving to Memphis at the age of twenty-two. Mattie had a sister, she adds, who had her leg cut off and died soon after.

A family connection! Proof. Of what? What is at stake here? In the post-Katrina world there are a thousand thesis papers percolating on the topic of art in reaction to flooding. So keep in mind that this timeline frames Delaney as a refugee of the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, and casual scholars have been quick to describe her music in those terms. One macabre book, Alan Clayson's *Death Discs* ("An account of fatality in the popular song") goes so far as to assert the "daddy" of Delaney's lyrics is a drowned lover. "Did she leave before the High Water?" Wardlow keeps asking in his interviews, "Or after?"

This nags at me. If the 1927 flood was an inspiring event, why call it "Tallahatchie River Blues"? Wouldn't it be "Mississippi River Blues"?

In another of Wardlow's reels with Henry Austin, focusing on his neighbor Willie Brown, Austin once again places Delaney in the Delta; he now recalls seeing her in Itta Bena, a good thirty miles south of Swan Lake. Lilly Berry struggles to confirm her earlier account. "I can't think of that girl's name," she says, her voice quavering a bit, "but she came to me, to us, as cousins." Then she rebounds with an elaboration—Mattie's father was not only a Doyle but "Bob Doyle," a devout leader at Tchula's Mount Zion Baptist Church. Wardlow digs deeper into the subject of Mattie's family. All dead, Berry says, though they'd looked for her while they were living. "They couldn't find out, they went everywhere.... But she was in Memphis." She hints that Bob Doyle's heart had been broken by his daughter's departure.

"Did she ever talk about playing the guitar in those days?" Wardlow asks. "Or did she ever play the guitar?"

"She used to *try*," Berry says.

In *Nobody Knows Where the Blues Come From: Lyrics and History*, professor of ethnomusicology David Evans suggests Calt may have been too hasty in assigning Mattie's surname and travel trajectory based on Berry's recollections. He points to an April 5, 1930, census record that shows a Mattie Delaney—age twenty-five, married, literate—living with her grandfather, "Jeff Melton," age seventy, in Glendora. This is only three miles south of Swan Lake and the Tallahatchie River, which as recently as January of that year had overflowed its banks.

Was Glendora home to the Mattie recalled by Henry Austin? I stay up late, looking at maps. Can this woman be reconciled with Lilly Berry's cousin, Mattie Doyle?

The 1920 census shows no teenage Mattie living with Jeff Melton. Did a strict father send Mattie Doyle running to Memphis in 1927, where she found some imperfect matrimony, only to send her running back to extended kin with a new last name by 1930? This makes a sad kind of sense: easier to imagine her disappearing into small-town Delta obscurity rather than in a big city with a touring circuit.

The wheels continue to turn. Was Delaney's grandfather blood to the popular Melton family plagued at the half-century when Elmer Kimbrell (later implicated in the Emmett Till murder) shot Clinton Melton at the gas station? I feel an urge to travel down to the County Courthouse in Sumner and paw through files. Perhaps I can find a birth certificate, a record of inheritance. Perhaps I'll find this is all just second-rate Nancy Drew work.

Somewhere here—between the fifth straight meal of couscous, the six-pack of Raging Bitch India Pale Ale, and the 16,000th Internet search—I realize I have been so busy theorizing about the life of the musician, I have gotten away from her music. So I cue up "Down the Big Road Blues."

> I'm a traveling woman,
> I got a traveling mind.
> If you don't take me back Daddy,
> Sure gonna lose your mind.
>
> I feel like crying
> Ain't got no tears to spare.
> I had a happy home
> And I wouldn't stay there.

I try to fit my square pegs of research into the round holes of this song. Who is the "Daddy"? Where does the sister go? What is the zip code on that happy home?

They don't fit, of course. I am consumed by all that doesn't fit: this strong woman who admits "I can't go down that big road by myself"; who is called *mama* by a lover in one verse, then invokes *mother* in another; her anxious enjambment of vocal phrases over the sure, easy rhythm of her guitar. This is a profoundly human recording, a moment caught in time at the Peabody Hotel—not a grand puzzle waiting to be solved.

It takes three passes through the archives of Middle Tennessee State University's Center for Popular Music before I figure out how to listen to Gayle Dean Wardlow's 1960s interviews. At times, the tape is choppy, indecipherable. But as Wardlow plays "Tallahatchie River Blues" for Henry Austin, you can hear Austin's voice warm. He describes Mattie Delaney as pretty and smooth-skinned. Wardlow presses gently, asking if he is sure they called her Mattie, whether she might have lived "on a plantation somewhere around Swan Lake." Why did no one ever ask where she was from?

It wasn't proper to ask a woman, Austin points out. "They'd get mad at you."

In 1991, reporter Patrick Howse interviewed Wardlow for *Monitor* magazine. Wardlow revealed plans to wind down his hunt for the lost fates of musicians. Surprised—this was on the heels of major discoveries about Robert Johnson—Howse asked why.

"The days of research are over," Wardlow replied, "you can't find primary sources anymore, they're all dead.... It's time for me to sit back with my record collection and enjoy the blues."

In the poetry world, we refer to this as the principle of *negative capability*. The phrase comes from Keats, who wrote in an 1817 letter to his brothers that the concept should be praised as "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason...."

It can be difficult to accept that some mysteries may stay mysteries. But those who enjoy the blues know that names, birthdates, hometowns—all is fungible when remembered only through conversations and story. You don't ask a woman who wields a guitar where she sleeps at night. You measure her by her sound, whether two tracks or two hundred. Whoever and wherever you are, Mattie, we thank you.