

Mighty Tight Woman

Mama Sylvie and the Northside Blues are the house band at The Mill every Tuesday night. When I lived in Chicago, I'd go see them every week, getting there early so I could get the table right up front, lean into Mama Sylvie as she leaned into the mike, her big hips marking time as surely as Barenboim's baton down at the CSO.

"My man don't love me, he treats me so mean." Mama Sylvie had this way she worked the notes so they sliced into you like paper cuts, each note working its way between layers of skin. You could see the audience shiver, especially the women, each song leaving the kind of cold sadness that begins at the bone, impervious to blankets or the large hands of men.

I could never quite make my notes sound like hers. I came close sometimes, but it was like I could never get past the point of keeping secrets. I couldn't tell the whole truth, not like Mama Sylvie did. You can't do the blues in a small way. I don't mean you've necessarily got to holler-shout them, but you've got to let them all the way in to get them all the way out. You have to actually feel the silk of that no-good man's shirt slipping through your fingers as you sing, really believing you want him to "skip that lipstick, don't explain."

I've been singing all my life, but I never wanted to sing the blues until I heard Billie Holiday slur her way through "Violets for Your Furs." "You brought me violets for my ferrss." Some folks will say she's not a blues singer because she didn't do that many twelve-bars, but on that song, at the end of each phrase, you can hear her voice shake, as if it's counting each drop of whiskey and each needleful of smack she's ever hungered. Her mouth sounds so heavy—with regret, with loss—that she can't even manage the final short "u" sound.

Listening to her, I thought, "Here's truth." I decided to stop singing show tunes—each with its carefully assigned slot—and learn the blues.

I tried to start my own band with this kid Josh—Little V and the Kings—but all he wanted to do was play Stevie Ray Vaughn.

In rehearsal he'd always tell me, "Nah, that's not how Stevie Ray does 'Tin Pan Alley.'" Then he'd play some indecipherable solo on his pawn-shop guitar.

"But shouldn't we be trying to get our own sound?" I'd protest, trying to get him to listen to Sippie Wallace and Little Esther. I was buying used discs of female blues singers by the armful, playing their songs over and over, trying to find my way into that heart-and-bone place Billie sang from. Josh just kept trying to sound like the record. Eventually, after sleeping with my friend Carrie a couple of times, he borrowed my Billie Holiday songbook and stopped showing up for rehearsals. I heard he works at TGIFridays now.

I was going to go back to show tunes, but then my friend Louie, who's a bass player, said he'd work with me a little. I had met Louie when I did this community theater version of *City of Angels*; he was in the pit band. He's got his own band too; they're small but good, the Four Flames. Louie plays slap bass, using every part of his hand on his upright—knuckle, palm, fingertip—so it sounds like he's one of those one-man bands you used to see a lot on The Gong Show working a combination washboard, bass drum, ukulele kit. The Flames play mostly jump tunes—the Treniers, Big Joe Turner, lots of Kansas City stuff.

Louie's favorite saying is, "The blues ain't about bad times, they're about a good man feeling bad and overcoming it." He got that from Ross Bon, who leads another Chicago band, the Mighty Blue Kings, and Ross claims he got it from Blind Willie Tell or maybe it was Blind Lemon Jefferson—well, one of those old bluesmen who can't see.

I still didn't really get it though. I'd spent most of my time learning how to stay exactly on beat, sing precisely in key, and most of all, have a pleasing tone. So when I sang, "I got the blues before sunrise," I sounded like I was at a church social, politely asking for a bowl of strawberry ice cream.

Louie tried to help. "Well, what's the blues before sunrise sound like as opposed to right at dawn?"

"What?"

"Woman, you can't sing that you got the blues before sunrise and expect me to believe that all the blues are the same. You've gotta tell me the specific shade of your particular blues."

I tried again, concentrating hard on pressing the sound up from my diaphragm. I got louder, but no better. Louie, to his credit, didn't give up on me.

"We just haven't found the right song for you to sink your teeth into."

We tried Chicago blues, Texas blues, country blues, and I even politely sang my way through some of Louie's beloved Kansas City blues. It wasn't that I sounded bad. I hit all the notes right on pitch, and I was pleasant to listen to. But I just wasn't singing the blues.

Louie said I kept "putting it on the plate and then not serving it." One night, he decided I should try getting drunk before we rehearsed. He was hoping a Manhattan or two would make me forget to think about my breathing and posture and just sing. That night was when I first heard Mama Sylvie.

I'd never been to The Mill before. All I knew is that it was a jazz club in Uptown, which had been Chicago's version of Harlem during the Cotton Club era. Al Capone and his friends and the Northside society families—from Evanston and Winnetka—and their friends used to all come slumming down to this tiny bar at Lawrence and Broadway to hear Billie and Big Mama Thornton and later Sinatra and his whole crew.

The front half of The Mill is long and narrow, suddenly opening out to accommodate a box-shaped dance floor at its far end. Behind the bar, running half the length of it, is a trap door that was supposedly used by gangsters and bootleggers during Prohibition. The original stage is a small spit of wood and lacquer sunk into the wall behind the bar. They've still got a grand piano up there, but now most of the bands play on a small platform in the back, on the dance floor next to the bathrooms.

The Mill is always packed—college kids from Loyola and Northwestern and jazz fans who can't afford the cover at the downtown Jazz Showcase. The bartenders stay just as busy shushing people as they do pouring drinks. Tuesday nights you'll find the blues crowd slouching up from their Southside dens—the Checkerboard Lounge, Lee's Unleaded—to roast themselves in Mama's slow burn.

The first night I heard Mama Sylvie, she was channeling T. Bone Walker. "They call it Stormy Monday, but Tuesday's just as bad." She rocked back and forth, eyes closed, arms splayed wide as if she were trying to stretch her big body even wider to hold the song.

Her voice landed like a large rock in my belly; I could feel my muscles tighten and relax, my body not sure if it wanted to sit perfectly still or shake, knowing that, either way, the song wasn't giving me back my body till it was good and ready.

Mama pushed on, modulating up for the next line. "They call it Stormy Monday, but Tuuuu-esday's just...as...baaaad." She looked as if she were going to swallow the microphone, allowing the song to pull her great head down as it pushed its way up and out. I watched in awe

as she just let it take her over. I could see her lips articulating different words, but to my ears, she was singing a litany of “yes, yes, yes.”

It took three months of Tuesdays, each followed by a week of hearing Mama’s voice in my head over and over, my baby mouth cooing after her songs, before I finally opened up enough for Louie to say, “yeah, now that’s something.”

Giddy with triumph, I asked Louie to let me sit in with his band some time. They had a late Sunday night gig coming up at The Mill, and he agreed to let me sing with them for the last set. That night, when I got to the club, I found out that Louie’s regular guitar player was sick. So this guy George was going to sub. It turns out George was Mama Sylvie’s regular guitarist. When I wasn’t watching Mama, trying to swallow her sound, I would watch George. It wasn’t that he was so attractive. He’s lanky, big-jawed, wide-eyed, and he hardly ever smiles. But it was the way he always cradled that hollowbody like he was bouncing a pretty blonde on his lap, tickling her in all the right places. You could just tell from the way he held his guitar that he knew exactly how to hold a woman.

George has a great voice too—a rough and honeyed growl—so sometimes, in addition to regular solos, Mama would let him step up to the mike for a song or two. My favorite was when he’d cover Little Walter’s “Ah’w Baby.” It’s meant to be a harp tune, but George could make that guitar moan and squeal as if he were actually pushing the music out with his own breath and tongue.

“Baaaby, you’re looking good again tonight.”

George’s voice went right past my gut, choosing instead to land some place lower. He sang the other side of the blues, what happened in the bed before the no-good man decided to stop keeping a toothbrush at your place.

“Guh-uh-uhrl, you’re looking good again tonight.” If Mama’s blues wanted you to open up and shake it all out, George’s blues demanded that you spread wide and take it all in. While he sang, my eyes followed his fingers as they nipped and plucked at the guitar. Inevitably, I’d feel my own hands mimicking his motions first on my hips, then on the front of my thighs. He was part of the reason I’d finally started to get it right. I could hear in Mama Sylvie’s voice, the way I’d first heard it in Billie’s, the desperation of a woman trying to hold onto her man; I could see in George the man we all wanted so much to hold onto.

That night I sat in with the Four Flames I ended the set with “Call It Stormy Monday,” the first song I’d learned from Mama Sylvie. George and I traded fours the last time through. I belted out, “Looooooooord, Lord have mercy on me.”

He answered with a C chord, the velocity and volume of his strumming building to such a frantic wail that I had no choice but to answer with one of my own. “Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord, Ohhhhhhhh Lord, please, please, please have mercy on me.” George’s guitar urging and pushing until I was practically on my knees begging God to send my man back.

At that point, we looked at each other—he’d moved up to stand right next to me during the chorus—and then we both bent suddenly forward as if we’d been socked in the stomach. There was a long four-count of silence, the rest of the band, even the drummer, having laid out to let us have our way, and then, mewling, I whispered, my defeated head bowed into the mike, “Won’t somebody please send my baby back to me?” Out of breath, I turned to George, who, holding my gaze, played a last sputtering riff.

There was another moment of silence, and then the whole Mill crowd erupted into cheers. I turned to beam back at the crowd, just as George leaned in, whispering into my ear, “You sound

good, baby.” After the show I wanted to tell George how good it’d been to sing with him, maybe find some way to tell him, “Now, *that* was the truth.” But by the time I’d made it through the crowd of well-wishers, he’d packed up his case and gone. I expected to see George a few days later at Mama Sylvie’s regular Tuesday show, but there was another guitarist subbing that night. Mama Sylvie came up to me, saying she’d heard about my Sunday night gig and congratulations. I was happy that George had told her, but later I found out that Louis was the one who’d talked to her, hoping to convince her to take me under her wing.

I figured I’d just see George the next week, maybe ask him if he wanted to jam one night. But it turns out my old voice teacher called, about a week after the gig at The Mill. She’d heard from a friend who’d heard from a guy who was a friend of another friend that they were doing an open call for a touring revival of *Les Miz*. Before I’d defected to the blues, I’d worked up a really good version of “On My Own,” the song Eponine sings when she discovers Marius is in love with Cosette. It’s a sort of confession that she’s been carrying on this affair with Marius in her head, the only way they can be together without him or life screwing it up. It’s not the blues, but it’s one of my favorite songs, and never having had a chance to perform it was one of the things I’d regretted about leaving musical theater behind. It turns out that the friend three times removed was right about the open call, and I remembered enough about breath support and controlling my vibrato and projecting a pleasing tone to get picked for the chorus.

Sometimes, as I paint on my stage makeup, becoming appropriately sooty and French, I find myself humming T-Bone. But I figure I’ve made the right choice because sooner or later the blues, even the second-hand way I sang them, was going to wreck my throat.