

'The Acapriccio Acapellist'

The Eunice Davis Story

By Opal Louis Nations with assistance from Steve Propes



Eunice Davis circa mid 1950s courtesy Opal Louis Nations

Much conjecture and indeed even absolute nonsense surround the notion of there ever being a first rock 'n' roll record. We know that African Americans have used the sexual term since at least the late Eighteenth century. Only heaven knows just how many musical lyrics were written and performed around the expression before the invention of recorded music. Morgan Wright, the Canadian collector, asserts that the first rock 'n' roll rhythm recording was made

in August 1929 when Charlie Spand and Blind Blake, without drumming accompaniment, recorded 'Hastings Street' (see Charlie Spand article in Issue B&R 217).

Wright describes the song as being in 4/4 time on both guitar and piano, separated from each other by a half beat, making eight beats to the bar, four each, but rocking. 'Hastings Street' is clearly a boogie-woogie record, as Blind Blake asserts in the lyrics. What is interesting is that the musicians make reference to influential like-minded pianists who played in and around the Detroit area.

One of the earliest 'Rocking And Rolling' title references comes from Robinson's Knights Of Rest with Scrapper Blackwell on guitar. This is an unreleased side cut in 1930, so we can only guess the content of the lyrics.

Jim Dawson states in his co-authored tome 'The First Rock And Roll Record', that rock 'n' roll became a slow-grinding, hip-swivelling dance term in 1925 when singer Clarence Buck fully expressed the lurid details.

We mention all this because Eunice Davis claims to be the originator of what came to be known as 'rock 'n' roll'. Her late 1949 Derby recording of 'Rock Little Daddy' certainly contains some of the elements one associates with a rock & roll sound – a walking blues pattern on piano and a continuous, recognisable back beat, but when she asserts that Cleveland disc jockey Alan Freed adopted the term because he frequently played 'Rock Little Daddy' over his WJW Moondog Show, it is taking the issue a little too far. It is more likely that Freed, who, during the 1940s knew little about r&b music, was made conscious of this seemingly new hip expression through his pal, sponsor and drinking buddy Leo Mintz, proprietor of Record Rendezvous, a large phonograph record shop in Cleveland's black inner-city ghetto. Mintz wised Freed to the fact that white teens were buying infectious black dance music and that coin was to be made by spinning it over the air. Despite all this, the unfairly neglected Eunice Davis made quite a considerable contribution to the history and development of black r&b music.

Eunice Emile Wright was born 23rd February 1920 in Dublin, Central Georgia. In her own words she says she was brought to Glassboro, New Jersey at two and a half and came to New York City at age three. Eunice caught the showbiz bug at an early age and wangled a job as an usherette at the Apollo Theater as she thought it would be easier to meet all those musical celebrities she so much admired. She met major stars such as Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Andy Kirk and Billie Holiday and got fired for visiting her newfound friends, the Three Chocolateers, in their dressing room. The Chocolateers were a wild comedy act.

Eunice was a proud, independent and sometimes very private person with a passion for the arts. She sketched, penned poetry and wrote and sang her own songs. Living in a small Harlem apartment put her in touch with all the movers and shakers of the day. It was an exciting time for music, says Eunice. Willie Bryant, 'the Mayor of Harlem', had a very popular late-night r&b radio show where he featured an all-black playlist. Eunice also had a place in her soul for the great female blues singers of the 1920s and 1930s.

While supported by an aunt, Eunice tried to break into the music business by peddling songs to publishers in Tin Pan Alley. Her method was to make up tunes in her head, hum them into a tape recorder and hire a musician to transcribe them onto sheet music. During this time Eunice appeared on the Apollo's amateur hour singing Eva Taylor's 1929 classic 'Moanin' Low'. She did not win a prize she says, because nobody had ever heard of the song, but she did turn a few heads.

Luis Russel's wife had heard Eunice sing and was impressed enough to tell her husband, who had Eunice rehearse with his band. Nothing came of it, as Russel was obligated by contract to another songster. Eunice's songwriting had met with little success until she met up with Freddie Mitchell. Florida-born Mitchell had joined Larry Newton's and Eddie Heller's Derby label on New York's Tenth Avenue shortly after its inception in late 1949. Eunice was introduced through Derby's General Sales Manager Phil Rose, a good friend of Eunice's. At this point, Mitchell had mostly recorded instrumentals for Derby, who were quite happy with the healthy sales figures

for some of them, especially boogies like 'Jingle Bell Boogie' and 'Easter Parade'. But Mitchell wanted to expand on the distaff side, increase band membership and showcase more vocal soloists. (He had only at this point played behind Betty McLaurin.)

With this in mind, Mitchell asked Eunice to come up with five songs. Before taking the charts to Mitchell she wanted to copyright them. Problem was she had to borrow fifty dollars from Alberta Hunter to pay the fee. Eunice decided to give Hunter fifty percent on the copyright as fair reimbursement. This is why Hunter's name appears on the label credit for 'Rock Little Daddy', a ditty which had taken Eunice all of fifteen minutes to write.

Larry Newton, who had had run-ins with the strong-minded Eunice over being paid for her songs after the session, did not want Mitchell to alter the winning formula, but luck was on Eunice's side. She just happened to be in the studio one day when a female songstress (probably Sarah 'Fat Woman' Dean) turned up for her session with Mitchell sick with laryngitis. They needed one song to put with 'Long Lean Daddy', a chart Dean had put in the can for a single. It took Freddie Mitchell and Phil Rose three hours to convince Newton that they should try one of Eunice's songs in an effort to salvage the session. Mitchell and Rose favoured 'Rock Little Daddy'. Newton caved in and Mitchell worked out a quick studio arrangement. Armed with only a lead sheet, which was common in those days, the band would pick up the chording by ear. If they came up with a good feeling, they usually went with it. Newton was sold on the tune after only one take.

The rhythm riff had exciting elements to it. Mitchell was wrong in his initial assumption that Eunice was little more than a torch ballad singer. 'Rock Little Daddy' had a punchy, brassy feel to it and Eunice really gave it a special pizzazz. After the session Eunice split for Connecticut to rehearse for a possible tour. Appearance-wise, one of the first engagements Eunice was asked to perform was with Lester Young at the Apollo, but a previous commitment in Montreal kept her from making this first important public debut.

Two days into rehearsal an ecstatic Rose called Eunice into the Derby offices. Newton wanted Eunice to sell all her songs to his own publisher Gene Goodman (Benny Goodman's brother.) Eunice, of course, could not go with the deal as she had made a prior arrangement with Alberta Hunter. Besides, she thought, why give him everything (which amounted to five recorded demos) when he had chosen only to record one. Failing to get a commitment on the demos, Newton tried to convince Eunice to front Freddie Mitchell's band as a full-time vocalist. Eunice's stubborn attitude and rugged independence fought against the idea of her becoming a run-of-the-mill band-singer under contract.

'Rock Little Daddy' hit the streets just after Christmas. A January 1951 Billboard sported a one third page Derby advert for it, proclaiming that Eunice was 'rockin' the boxes'. 'Rock Little Daddy' became a territorial hit almost at once. It had been a year since Eunice was fired out of her usherette job at the Apollo. Now she was enjoying third billing there with The Ravens and Cootie Williams. In fact, she appeared at the Apollo three times. She also enjoyed gigs in New Jersey, at the Howard, the Flame Show Bar in Detroit, the Powelton Café, the Delmar in Montreal and a venue in Cleveland.

After her first performance at the Apollo, Bubbles, of Buck and Bubbles fame, told Eunice he had not seen an artist with so much personality since Florence Mills (Mills was an internationally celebrated jazz singer of the 1920s). The New York Variety Magazine described Eunice by calling her a 'thrush with a good set of pipes'. They predicted she would 'click in wider bookings', but this never came to be. Eunice Davis never fitted into a business, which required a lot of demands from those who held the keys to a successful career.

Just weeks after the promising regional sales of 'Rock Little Daddy', Eunice was back in the studio with the Freddie Mitchell Orchestra. She cut four tunes, for two singles issued in April and August of

1951. The first release featured the deep, bluesy 'Evening Train', with Mitchell's down-in-the-alley tenor sax break and the bouncy, more favourably received 'I'm A Wild West Woman', again featuring a booting sax break. On this Eunice gives all her loving to Bronco Bill. We have to assume that our gal needs a lot of roping.

The following release, 'Got News For You Baby' sliced with 'Tell Me I'm The One', gives us more or less the same musical formula. Out of these, 'I'm A Wild West Woman' caught the most notice but did not hit. Eunice had refused to sign a short-term contract with Newton. This not only worked against her but freed her up to go elsewhere. Work took Eunice to the Earl Theatre in Philadelphia, with the Clovers, Moms Mabley and Slim Gaillard. She appeared with Hot Lips Page (who supported her act) in Frankford, Pa. Other songs by Eunice, or Eunice in collaboration, include a handful of unsubstantiated vintage. Some of these were 'Walk Slow', 'Lonesome', 'You Don't Score No More', 'You're Riding High Baby' and 'Sitting And Drinkin' (which must have differed from Christine Kittrell's confessional opus).

NEW ATLANTIC RELEASES

EUNICE "ROCK LITTLE DADDY"

DAVIS "GO TO WORK PRETTY DADDY"

"LET'S MEET ON 125th STREET"
Atlantic #992

the ROCKETS

"OPEN THE DOOR"

"BIG LEG MAMA"
Atlantic #993

TINY GRIMES
and his Rocking Highlanders

"BEGIN THE BEGUINE"
and

"THE MAN I LOVE"
Atlantic #990

STICK McGHEE

"NEW FOUND LOVE"
and

"MEET ME IN THE MORNING"
Atlantic #991

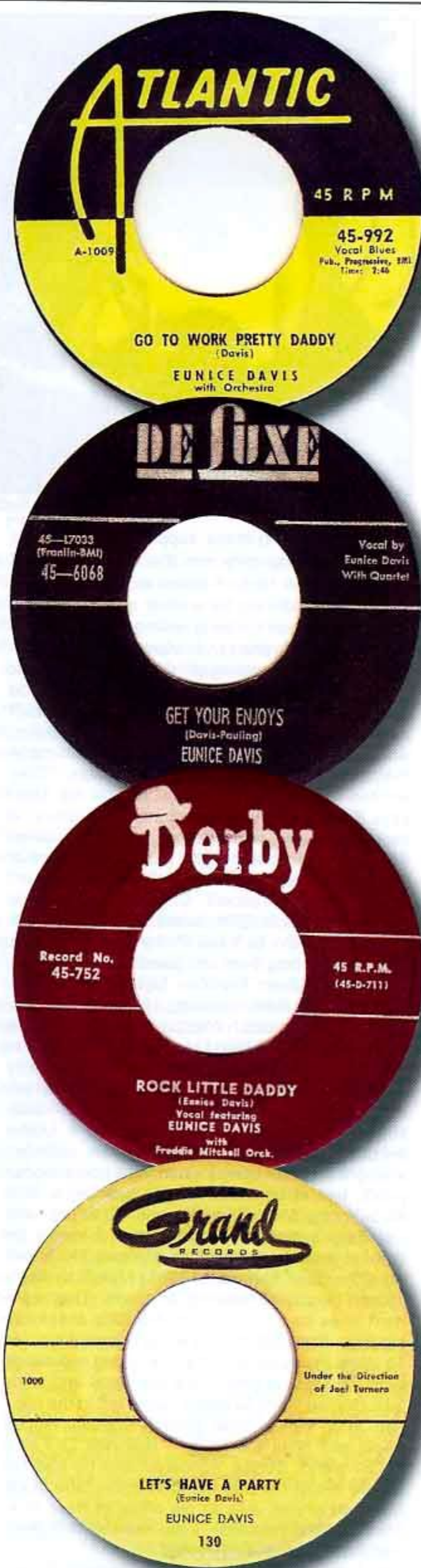
A NEW ATLANTIC GOSPEL HIT

THE ROSETTES

"SOMEWHERE"
and **"WHEN IT'S TIME FOR ME TO GO"**
Atlantic #3003

ATLANTIC RECORDING CORP.
234 WEST 56th St. NEW YORK 19, N. Y.

Billboard advert. From Galen Gart's *First Pressings*



Label shots courtesy Victor Pearlin

In September 1951, Eunice signed a limited contract with Coral Records on 57th Street. Under Phil Rose's A&R direction, Eunice recorded the unissued 'Hot Rod Daddy' (not the Ronny and The Daytonas song), 'What Do You Want' (in no way similar to the Robins' chart), 'I Want A Wild One' and the most collectable of those issued, 'Work Daddy Work', which sounded a winner but could not compete with Roscoe Gordon's 'Booted' or Jimmy Forrest's 'Night Train' for airtime attention.

Coral thought so well of 'Work Daddy Work', they issued it as the topside to both of the Eunice Davis Coral releases put out in January and March of 1952. It is quite obvious that Decca (the parent company) spent little to promote 'Work Daddy Work', which finger-snaps along with



Eunice Davis circa 1980. Courtesy Opal Louis Nations

much grit and big-brass support. On the other hand, something tells me that Eunice's heart was not in this type of material. Disenchanted, Eunice quit show biz for a short spell to refocus her time, not only on song writing but to manage the luncheonette she ran in Manhattan.

During the early spring of 1953, Ahmet Ertegun, one of the heads of Atlantic Records, took off on a talent-scouting trip. Among the artists he much admired were Clyde McPhatter and Eunice Davis, who after diplomatic persuasion were both made members of his West 56th Street stable. "They wanted to get something real hot on me fast," says Eunice, but no one had any real interest in her as a person with her own views and ideas. Thinking only of dollar signs, they wanted another 'Rock Little Daddy'. What surfaced during April 1953 was a Crescent City-sounding sender called 'My Beat Is 126th Street', sandwiched with the jumping 'Go To Work Pretty Daddy,' with its solid, easy loping beat and blasting sax from ace session man Sam 'The Man' Taylor.

Gracing this 24th February, 1953 session were not only the top-notch Atlantic sessions stalwarts of the day, but old friend Harry Van Walls, whom Eunice had touched base with back in the Derby days when Van Walls played with Freddie Mitchell. 'Go To Work Pretty Daddy', besides Van Walls' super hammering, had much going for it. Unlike previous recordings, Eunice's voice sounded stronger and a lot less strained. Alas however, her slicing had to compete with Ruth Brown's 'Wild Wild Young Men', the Clover's 'Crawling' and Hal Paige's classic stomper 'Drive It Home' for coin, at a time when Ruth's '(Mama) He Treats Your Daughter Mean' and Willie Mae Thornton's 'Hound Dog' were cresting the charts. They were hard times for a no major hit r&b act to break into big time. Because of poor sales figures from 'Go To Work Pretty Daddy', the remaining two songs from the session date, 'Take Me Back' and 'Little Girl, Do You Want To Ride?', were left in the can.

In later years, after Ahmet Ertegun helped found and chair the Rock & Roll Hall Of Fame in Cleveland, Eunice wondered why he had not helped induct her into the foundation. She made repeated phone calls to his office in New York. After all, she insisted, "I did cut the first (truly authentic) rock and roll record."

In December 1953 Eunice managed to pull in a gig headlining at Harlem's Dawn Casino, supported by the Five Crowns and Big Joe Medlin. Hot Lips Page and his band provided musical support. During this time Carl Lebow, former A&R man at Apollo Records on West 45th Street (and yet another friend of Eunice's), asked if she would consider writing songs for artists at King Records, a label he had switched to in order to advance his A&R opportunities. His underlying plan was to take the 5 Royales to King and have Eunice and Lowman Pauling (bass singer, arranger and guitarist with the 5 Royales) write songs not only for the group but for other artists on the King roster. Work would be conducted from an office in New York.

NB: Steve Propes thinks that aside from selling songs back in 1950 to Mitchell at Derby, Eunice quite possibly might have written 'Queen Bee Blues' for Eddie Vinson, but substantiation is required on this.

December 1953 seems to have been the start of the staff writing engagement. This fell almost four months before the 5 Royales quit Apollo to go with King. Sessions were conducted at Beltone Sound Studios in the City. One of the couple's first song-writing assignments was with Country Homes. Michel Ruppli states that Country Homes (sic.), who is in fact Johnny Holmes, was second lead singer with the Royal Sons (5 Royales). The Royal Sons quintet evolved into the 5 Royales at the behest of Carl Lebow.

The late 1953 Country Homes (sic.) session netted four songs. We only know for sure that 'Put Me In The Alley' is a Davis-Pauling composition. The Martha Moore session of the same month, quite possibly from the same day, gave us four Davis-Pauling charts – 'It's A Hard Way To Go', 'Yo Yo Yo' (both DeLuxe 6038), 'I Needs A Whole Lot Of Everything' (DeLuxe 6049) and an unissued version of 'Put Me In The Alley'. These were followed by four songs from the Buddy Phillips session of 11th March 1954 – 'Sleep On', 'That's I Wanna See' (both DeLuxe 6045) and 'Well Done' and 'Lets Get It On' (both DeLuxe 6051).

The team also wrote for The Blue Dots vocal group who were discovered by a King scout while playing the Peacock theatre in Atlanta, Georgia. The Peacock was also a frequent venue for the 5 Royales who may have had something to do with the Dots' good fortune. Davis-Pauling songs recorded on 26th July, 1954 included 'You Got To Live For Yourself', 'Don't Do That Baby' (both DeLuxe 6052), 'Don't Hold It', 'Street Of Sorrow' (both DeLuxe 6055), 'Save All Your Love For Me' (DeLuxe 6061), 'Hold Me Tight' and 'Let Me Know Tonight' both (DeLuxe 6067).

Five weeks later, on 1st September 1954, the Davis-Pauling team had The Checkers record four of their songs (this was when the group was headed by Perry Hayward of the Sparrows). Titles were 'Mama's Daughter', 'I Wasn't Thinking, I Was Drinking' (both King 4751) and 'Trying To Hold My Gal' and 'Can't Find My Sadie' (both King 4764). Right after that the pair penned 'How I Wonder' for the 5 Royales, one of the group's most righteous recordings. Others followed.

During February of 1955 Eunice, with the 5 Royales (unaccredited on the label), cut 'Get Your Enjoys', a sexy, teasing, hot Latin-flavoured turntable burner, which to my mind is one of Eunice's most significant sides. The record was issued almost immediately, coupled with a solo-rendered ballad of little interest from a second session, called 'Twenty-Four Hours A Day' (not to be confused with the Earl Gaines song which is totally different). 'Get Your Enjoys' is one of the snappiest and certainly one of the most provocative slices of impropriety to escape the industry's censorship board. Eunice's teasing lyric is just perfect and the 5 Royales' background accompaniment fits like a well-tailored glove.

Besides heavy competition from The Moonglows, Etta James and the late Johnny Ace, among a legion of fierce contenders, Eunice should have drawn more notice for 'Get Your Enjoys', but the cards were simply stacked against her. Despite being cursed by ill luck, Eunice decided to give

waxing one last try. A July 1955 issue of Billboard announced that Stan Pat, the A&R rep for Grand Records in Havertown, Pa. had signed Eunice Davis to a three-year recording contract. Whether this coincided with her move to Pittsburgh is not known. We do know that Grand issued 'Let's Have A Party'/'Every Time Your Lips Met Mine' in August 1955.

Eunice stated that 'Let's Have A Party' was no good. The sales figures supported that sentiment, and Eunice quit the recording business. "One of my last appearances," she went on to say, "was at the Rousse Café in New York." Her support roster read like royalty, with Horace Silver on piano, Gerry Mulligan blowing sax and Oscar Pettiford plucking bass. "I sang a swinging version of 'I Cried For You' (the 1923 nugget penned by Arthur Freed) and the audience was very appreciative."

At later times Eunice showcased at Reno Sweeny and Kelly's place in Greenwich Village as well as working with Loumell Morgan at a little East Side bar on Lexington Avenue, where she would mix music with poetry. In 1978 she moved west to Phoenix, Arizona, where she shacked up with Louisiana Red (Iverson Minter), the Vicksburg, Mississippi born guitar, Dobro and harp player. Red had just split up with Odetta (Gordon). A short, rocky relationship with Eunice ensued during which time Horst Lippman, the German blues promoter, had them record an album together (in 1980) for his L & R record company at New York's Penthouse Studios entitled 'Eunice Davis Sings The Classic Blues Of Victoria Spivey, Memphis Minnie And Eunice Davis'. This was a project she had wanted to realise since she started out in the music biz. The album is a fine sampling of some ten down-home blues songs, including a reading of Clarence Williams' 'Organ Grinder Blues'.

Louisiana Red played mean Dobro (in the style he would have applied to his guitar), and the proceedings were rounded out with Clem Moorman on piano, Lucky and Flash on acoustic guitar and washtub bass, plus Washboard Doc on washboard. Good old back-country blues was the theme and the confection worked amazingly well throughout.

By 1981 the Davis-Louisiana Red relationship had come to an end. Eunice had tossed Red out of her apartment and thrown all his duds out on the porch. In 1984 Eunice and her third husband Merv Fusch moved out to Southern California. They first stayed in San Pedro before moving into a condo in Long Beach. They set up the Davis Fusch Graphics Company on Signal Hill. Eunice continued to write songs and poems, calling herself an 'Acapriccio-Acapellist' which means, in plain terms, a jazzy singer performing without music. She had taken her act to folk and blues festivals in Europe where she was met with welcoming approval. Eunice Davis passed, almost without notice in the press, on 13th July, 1999.



Eunice Davis circa 1986, courtesy Opal Louis Nations