with the Roy Milton band

CDCHD 1192

ace

Mickey Champion

BAM-A-LAM The R&B Recordings 1950-1962

1. **BAM-A-LAM** (Edward Pierce) Rockin' Music (1955)
2. **GOOD FOR NOTHIN' MAN** (Joe Josea, Alicia Szabo) Modern Music Pub Co (1951)
3. **BEST FRIEND** (Mickey Champion) Universal Music Pub MGB (1992)
4. **HE'S A MEAN MAN** (Mickey Champion) Universal Music Pub MGB (1952)
5. **I'M A WOMAN** (Mickey Champion) Rockin' Music (1955)
6. **I'VE GOT IT BAD** (Alicia Szabo, Jules Taub) Universal Music Careers (1950)
7. **TWO FACED DADDY** (Jessie Robinson) EMI Unart Cat Inc (1952)
8. **DON'T SAY YOU LOVE ME** (Rufus Beacham) EMI Longitude Music (1952)
9. **I'M NOT CRYING ANYMORE** (Jack Carrington) Copyright Control (1952)
10. **WHAT HAVE YOU GOT** (Jessie Mae Robinson) Copyright Control (1952)
11. **LOVIN' JIM** (Jerry Leiber, Mike Stoller) Sony/ATV Music Pub (UK) (1952)
12. **IF THAT'S THE WAY YOU FEEL** (Rosco Gordon) Bab-Roc Music Pub Co (1951)
13. **EVERYBODY KNEW IT BUT ME** (Alicia Szabo, Jules Taub) Universal Music Careers (1950)
14. **IF YOU CAN'T HOLD YOUR MAN WITH YOUR KISS** (Joe Josea) Modern Music Pub Co (2008)
15. **FOUND ME A SUGAR DADDY** - THE NIC NACS (Jules Taub) Universal Music Pub MGB (1950)
16. **GONNA HAVE A MERRY XMAS** - THE NIC NACS (Joe Josea) Modern Music Pub Co (1950)
17. **IT'S RAINING A LONG WAY FROM HOME** (Joe Josea) Modern Music Pub Co (2008)
18. **WON'T SOMEBODY PLEASE TELL ME WHAT TO DO** (Joe Josea) Modern Music Pub Co (2008)
19. **ROCKIN' PNEUMONIA AND THE BOOGIE WOOGIE FLU** - ROY MILTON & MICKEY CHAMPION (Huey Smith) EMI Music Pub Ltd (1957)
20. **I'M TELLIN' YOU BABY** - THE NIC NACS (Dootsie Williams) Rockin' Music (2000)
21. **YOU'RE GONNA SUFFER BABY** - ROY MILTON & HIS ORCHESTRA (vocal by MICKEY CHAMPION) (Mickey Champion) Fort Knox Music Inc/Trio Music Co (1956)
22. **RM BLUES** - ROY MILTON & MICKEY CHAMPION (Roy Milton) Sony/ATV Music Pub (UK) (1962)
23. **THERE AIN'T NOTHING BETTER** - JIMMY WITHERSPOON & HIS GAL FRIDAY (Alicia Szabo, Jules Taub) Universal Music Pub MGB (1950)
24. **BAM-A-LAM** (Edward Pierce) Rockin' Music (2008)

I first saw Mickey Champion in person when celebrating my 60th birthday at Lunaria's Jazz Club on Santa Monica Boulevard in Los Angeles. Mickey was decked out and looking sassy in what might pass as a white summer bridal dress. Backed by her band, the Black Shadows, the short, heavy-set Mickey gave a gut-bucket performance of steamy ballads like 'Please Send Me Someone To Love' and hard-assed tunes such as 'Dr Feelgood'. At times she would flirt with the fellas and lifted her dress like a chorine at the Follies or draped a leg over a chair, at other times she would assert her womanhood with a swaggering look of stubborn grit. Like a boxer trying to weigh up an opponent's next move, Mickey light-stepped through the crowd – a stalking tiger. With her keenness for booze, her fondness to party and zest for a good time, Mickey has so far managed to burn out anyone who tries to follow after her with a never-ending store of energy.

Born Mildred Sallier in Lake Charles, Louisiana some time in 1926 (Lee Hildebrand gives her year of birth as 1923), Mickey spent her childhood days under the care of her mother's aunts as her mother had become pregnant with her at age 16. Mickey's mother, having secured her a home, then moved to Oklahoma, where she married a policeman.

Lee Hildebrand states that Mickey's grandfather had been a well-respected deacon in St Louis, Missouri during the 1920s. This could possibly have been the same man who was bishop of the Lake Charles CME Church at which the mighty-piped Mickey became a five-year-old singing sensation.

Mickey remembers meeting the renowned Lutcher family and becoming friendly with singer/composer/pianist Nellie Lutcher, nine years her senior. She recalls the Lutchers performing local shows involving the entire family, except for one sibling, Bubba, who showed no interest in performing. Instead, Bubba went on to become a well-know deejay in the St Louis area.

Mickey was soon holding forth with a vocal trio in high school, and was already good enough to impress the renowned band-leader Louis Jordan. Jordan came to play in Lake Charles, and Mickey sang a song for him. "He came to my aunt's house to take me along with him," says Mickey, "but my aunt and uncle were not gonna let me go."

Although singing was her passion, and she had often given little impromptu concerts without a microphone, it was not something she wanted to make her profession. In 1943, just out of high school, she met and married soldier boy Norman Champion. The pair moved out to Los Angeles, where he was stationed in 1945. When they broke up Norman moved to Seattle while Mickey stayed in LA.

Just after the war, LA's Central Avenue was a thriving hotbed of musical talent. The clubs on Central attracted major talent like Count Basie and Duke Ellington. For a young singer like Mickey, it was like having the run of a musical candy store. "I'd just go up on Central and look at the other singers," says Mickey. "Billie Holiday, Jimmy Witherspoon, T-Bone Walker. I'd go and hear 'em all." She also went to see Dinah Washington at the Elks Club.

Billed as "Little Mickey Champion", she started getting work in small clubs. She quickly gained a reputation as an exceptional live performer who could bring the house down with her booming voice, without the aid of amplification. Just like her heroine, Billie Holiday, Mickey found herself singing on Central's Jack's (Jackson's) Basket Room, affectionately referred to by the club world as "Bird In A Basket".

By the late 1940s, Mickey was appearing at swanky clubs like Slim Jenkins' Place in Oakland. She toured widely, even sharing the bill with Billie Holiday at the Greystone Ballroom and the Winterland Palace in Detroit, and with Sarah Vaughan in Kansas City.

After Johnny Otis signed with Modern Records in July 1949, he attended a talent show at the Largo Theatre in Watts, just a few doors from the Barrelhouse Club. On the show was Esther Mae Jones, aka Little Esther (Phillips), Mickey Champion and Big Jay McNeely. Both Jones and Mickey impressed Otis, but it was Jones that Otis picked up and took to the Barrelhouse. When Johnny Otis and Little Esther's release of 'Double Crossing Blues' on Savoy Records looked like being a major sensation during the spring of 1950, he had a problem. A large volume of work was coming in but he could not fill the engagements as Esther was only 14 years old. This meant that at most venues she was under age. Besides which, Esther had heroin problems and could not always be relied upon to appear. Now that Little Esther was not working out, why not pick up Mickey, after all? Mickey could sing just like, and as well as, Little Esther, and not only did she resemble her but both singers were the same height and build. No one would know, thought Otis, if Mickey went out as Esther. After all, few people had seen Little Esther's photograph.

The Barrelhouse, a popular Watts night spot, opened in 1948. It was owned by Otis in partnership with Bardu Ali and his wife and Otis played there most nights. Mickey was auditioned and put on the club's talent show and later, on a tour to the Bay Area, Mickey filled in at Sweet's Ballroom in Oakland and a few other Bay Area venues as the substitute Little Esther. "Otis," says Mickey, "took me all over the US on the strength of 'Double Crossing Blues'."

Around this time, Mickey took up songwriting and claims she penned 'Lonesome Blues', a tune Charles Brown & the Three Blazers took to #5 on Billboard's Juke Box chart. If this is so, she was taken off the label credit as the song is ascribed to Johnny Blackburn and Leon Rene. Recent reissues of 'Lonesome Blues', however, now credit Mickey as writer.

The Robins began life in San Francisco in 1947 as the Sharps Trio. Consisting of Ty Terrell and the Richard brothers Billy and Roy, they moved to LA in 1949 and appeared at Johnny Otis' Barrelhouse Club.

With the addition of basso Bobby Nunn, they became the Four Bluebirds. Reinventing themselves as the Robins, they briefly recorded for Aladdin Records' Score subsidiary before moving with Otis to Savoy, where, among other charts, they backed Little Esther on the mega-selling 'Double Crossing Blues'.

Mickey's official recording career began in the autumn of 1950 with the release of 'He's A Mean Mean Man', supported by the Happy Joe Lewis Band, according to Lee Hildebrand. The waxing was made for Bill McCall's 4 Star label in Los Angeles. The record's flip, 'Party Line', was a Happy Joe composition. Mickey's first actual recordings were taped live at Frank Bull and Gene Norman's first annual Blues & Rhythm show on Sunday, 16 July 1950 at LA's Shrine Auditorium at 649 West Jefferson Boulevard, in front of an estimated nine thousand delirious jazz and R&B fans. Billed on the programme as Little Mickey & her Flames, she recorded an undetermined number of songs, two of which appear on this collection: a re-rendering of 'He's A Mean Man' (one 'mean' shorter than the 4 Star version) and 'Lovin' Jim', a low-down dirty blues initially issued by Ace on their first volume of the Leiber & Stoller collections (Ace CDCHD 1010).

Mickey had just hooked up with Roy Milton (her second husband) and it was probably his band that supported her on this glorious occasion. Members probably included Charles Gillum, trumpet; Jackie Kelso, alto sax; Jimmy Jackson, tenor sax; Camille Howard, piano; Johnny Rogers, guitar; Dallas Bartley, bass; and Roy Milton on drums. Dinah Washington (Mickey's idol), Helen Humes, Pee Wee Crayton, Jimmy Witherspoon, the Joe Lutcher Band, Gene Phillips, "Tiny" Webb and Ellis "Slow" Walsh all appeared on the bill. Gene Norman was so awed that he pressed to manage Mickey's career but she would have none of it.

During the July/August 1950 period Mickey cut two audition sessions for the Biharis. Some of these demos are issued here for the first time. These include the chipper 'If You Can't Hold Your Man With Your Kiss' with its fine tenor and guitar breaks, 'It's Raining A Long Way From Home', a gloomy alley blues sung pitch-perfect with what sounds like Pete Lewis' standout guitar fills, and the similarly melancholy 'Won't Somebody Please Tell Me What To Do'. All three give us Champion in her unpolished prime.

Summer 1950 was a busy time for Mickey as she was also partnered with Jimmy Witherspoon, billed as his Gal Friday at the time when he was enjoying enormous success at the Oasis Club. For the topside of Modern 20-782, Mickey co-recorded 'There Ain't Nothin' Better' with Ben Webster's tenor sax in support.

In November 1950 the Robins switched their name to the Nic Nacs and recorded at least one full session at Modern in LA with Mickey Champion. Otis had Mickey reinstate the winning formula that made 'Double Crossing Blues' a hit by having her wax 'Found Me A Sugar Daddy' with the Nic Nacs in the same vein (see also "Modern Vocal Groups, Vol 1" for its inclusion). Apart from the "sweet vibrato edge" Mickey has in her voice, you could not tell her apart from Little Esther.

To celebrate the 1950 Christmas season, Mickey cut 'Gonna Have A Merry Christmas', a bluesy Esther-inflected opus in the prevailing Otis style (see "R&B Christmas", Ace CDCHM 1128, for its first reissue). At least one other chart, 'I'm Tellin' You Baby', a swing-time bouncer from the same session, is included here for the first time. This is a different

with Dootsie Williams (far left), Johnny Otis (centre front) and Roy Milton (centre, next to Mickey)

take from the one which emerged on "Yet More Mellow Cats & Kittens, Vol 4" (Ace CDCHD 1174). The release of the Christmas record was preceded by a matter of weeks with the issue of the sultry-sounding ballad 'Everybody Knew It But Me', partnered with the tough-belted 'I've Got It Bad'. Here we find Mickey over in Dinah Washington's corner. Mickey always said she idolised Washington and used her as a role model, and it shows on this track. 'I've Got It Bad' is brightened by Pete Lewis' remarkable fret-work. It wasn't until May 1951 that Modern opted to follow up her Christmas novelty with the jazz-coloured 'Good For Nothin' Man' and the awkwardly unsuited 'If That's The Way You Feel', on their RPM subsidiary.

She joined Herb Jeffries and Jack McVea's band, who played the Elks Hall in November 1950. By then she had dropped the "Little" from her name. Some time during March 1951 she appeared on a Ben Waller "Hollywood Review" with Jimmy Grissom and Little Willie Littlefield at different venues around the San Francisco Bay Area. In April 1951 Mickey was back at Jack's Basket Room on Central with Smokey Lynn and Jimmy Grissom, sharing time on the show. Maurice Simon's Orchestra, featuring Jack 'Open The Door, Richard' McVea on tenor sax, supported the proceedings.

A month earlier, Mickey was called upon by John Dolphin. Dolphin hired Mickey to front the Nic Nacs (who had switched names back to the Robins).

Mickey was elected to lead on 'School Girl Blues' for Dolphin's Recorded in Hollywood label. The group personnel had remained the same but instrumentation was provided by Eddie Beal on piano; Chuck Norris, guitar; Red Callender, bass; with Lee Young or Chico Hamilton on drums. This was Dolphin's usual band support.

She signed a contract with Aladdin Records in December 1951 and cut one session, arranged and conducted by Maxwell Davis & his All Stars. Two releases ensued over a period of four months during the 1952 summer season. The four charts were the moody 'Two Faced Daddy', the Mesner Brothers' sulky nod to Dinah Washington, the classy ballad 'Don't Say You Love Me', the sweetly rendered 'I'm Not Crying Anymore' and the bluesy, draggin' 'What Have You Got'. The likely line-up of the All Stars is Jewel Grant, alto sax; Maxwell Davis, tenor sax; Clyde Dunn, baritone; Earl Jackson, piano; Tiny Webb, guitar; Red Callender, bass; and Dill Douglas, drums.

Both singles were well received in the trades, but because Mickey always did what she wanted, and her greatest fear was flying, she could not effectively get behind her recordings to promote them. Consequently, good work went unnoticed. In a last-ditch effort to give Mickey one more spin, Score (the Aladdin subsidiary) issued an album which included Mickey's four songs with four by Billie Holiday and four by Delores Gibson. The collection surfaced in 1957 but by then it was too late.

Mickey stayed with the Roy Milton Band off and on for seven years. In April 1954 they played a two-week engagement at The Royal Room in LA. In the summer they worked a series of one-nighters through Texas, Louisiana and Oklahoma. After an appearance at the Savoy Ballroom in LA, Mickey and Milton were off on another series of engagements all over the West Coast. Following in the concept of the Johnny Otis R&B Touring Caravan, Milton gathered Mickey, the Flairs, Queens and Penguins for a package that would take the entourage up to Santa

Barbara and onto San Pedro, El Paso, Tucson, Phoenix and back to Imperial, California.

A big party was held at the 5-4 Ballroom in May 1955 to celebrate Milton's twentieth anniversary in show biz. After a series of out-of-state engagements, Mickey and Milton signed with Dootsie Williams' Dootone Records. Williams saw fit only to issue one single on Mickey, the gloriously raunchy and jubilant 'I'm A Woman', one of Mickey's finest moments on wax. Although the record got off to a promising start, somehow sales figures stalled. It was only when Peggy Lee recorded the song for Capitol in 1963 (as a cover of Christine Kittrell's excellent Vee-Jay version) that anyone took notice. The flip was 'Bam-A-Lam', an all-out rocker.

At this point, Clifford Scott had replaced "Jumpin'" Jimmy Jackson on tenor sax, Floyd Turnham had been added on baritone sax, Jimmy Davis sat in place of Johnny Rogers, and Lawrence Kato had replaced Dallas Bartley.

Dootone did what they could to further Milton's and Mickey's careers and, by October 1956, with most of Milton's long-serving band crew gone, he and Mickey switched over to King Records in Cincinnati. With five new Milton Band recruits, plus the presence of second female soloist Inez Coleman, the aggregation recorded four songs at the Cincinnati studios. Two were fronted by Mickey. These were an improved remake of 'Bam-A-Lam', the outstanding 'You're Gonna Suffer, Baby' (also fronted by Mickey), a fabulous rollicking "One Zippy Zam" led by Milton and a tune called "Succotash."

Two more King sessions followed. The first, in February 1957, gave us 'I'm Grateful', sliced with 'Skid Row'. The second session five months later in July turned out the stomping 'Rockin' Pneumonia And The Boogie Woogie Flu', Huey Smith's opus done up righteously by both Milton and Mickey on lead vocal, 'A Brand New Thrill', 'Jeep's Blues' and a convincing remake of Milton's old standard, 'RM Blues', with Milton and Mickey in the spotlight.

1948 l-r: Roy Milton, Camille Howard, Mickey Champion. Far right Roy Montrell. Courtesy Norbert Hess

For no reason except lack of promotion, the King sides sank. One wonders where Syd Nathan's sales department people were at that time. In their private life, things were not working out between Mickey and Milton. After two sides recorded with him for Warwick Records, Mickey left Milton. The Roy Milton Band then signed with Mike Gradny's Cenco label in Pasadena.

Mickey returned to her old stomping grounds, the welcoming lights of the night club circuit. She complained that despite signing contracts with major labels, they never called to record her. She praised the small, independent companies for pushing her as much as they could but, in reality, her fierce independence and fondness for booze, in tandem with rampant blackballing behaviour, did much to keep her off wax.

Mickey made another stab at re-recording 'Bam-A-Lam'. It surfaced as the first of two singles cut for Lilly Records on LA's East Florence Avenue in 1961. In 1963, Mickey was fortunate enough to have a first-rate All Star band to support her on engagements. The group lasted a year and sadly went unrecorded. Clifford Scott from Milton's band played tenor sax, Big Jim Wynn sat in on baritone, Curtis Tilman played bass, Pee Wee Crayton was added on guitar, Nat Dove played piano, and Mickey's boyfriend at the time – Bop Daddy – sat in on drums. The combo enjoyed a regular engagement at LA's Club House. Sometimes they played out in Watts.

Mickey Champion recorded again in 1965 for the tiny Musette label on Logan Street. In 1970, she cut a session with Johnnie Morisette at Chess. One single emerged without Mickey's vocal presence – 'I Know It Was Your Love', backed with 'I Love Women'.

She retired from music after this to raise her seven children born of two marriages. After her kids were able to take care of themselves, she found herself a job as cook for the LA Unified School District. Now and again Mickey either sat in on, or came out on, a weekend club performance. Mickey looked up her old boss, Johnny Otis, and he hired her to sing with his band on Saturdays and Sundays, which left her free to continue in her job. In late June 1998, at the urging of her friend, singer Barbara Morrison, Mickey played the Monterey Blues Festival and demolished the crowd.

In April 1999 Mickey was filmed live on stage at Jonathan Hodges' famed blues venue, Babe & Ricky's Inn on Leimert Boulevard. The resulting movie documentary, Champion Blues, directed by Aletha Rodgers, has won awards at festivals across the country. In May 1999 Mickey returned to Babe & Ricky's Inn to record under Hodges' direction a live

CD entitled "I Am Your Living Legend" (Tondef 5259001). She then recorded a second CD, "Live At The Living Room" (Tondef BR17973), for R&M Sound. Hodges managed Mickey's affairs and celebrated come-back, had her booked regularly at The Living Room on Crenshaw Boulevard, Lunaria's on Santa Monica Boulevard, The Three of Clubs, Spaceland, Farfalla on La Brea, and of course Babe & Ricky's Inn, LA's longest-running night club. Hodges also managed to convince Mickey to fly once again and she travelled with him to Atlanta for the blues festival of 2003. This gave her confidence to fly twice more for live shows.

Living in the Crenshaw district, Mickey is as active today (despite some disabilities) in the local LA clubs (she remains faithful to her adoring fans) as ever before, going out five nights a week. Until recently, Mondays and Tuesdays were reserved for her regular, weekly engagements. On most Mondays she can be found at Cozy's Bar & Grill in Sherman Oaks, supported by the John Marx Band. On Tuesdays, the 82-year-old Mickey can be seen in all her splendour at downtown's Little Pedro's Cantina at First and Vignes Streets. If you miss seeing her at these venues, you can most likely catch her at Babe & Ricky's in Leimert Park. Her current CD release is entitled "What You Want" and can be purchased through her own website, www.mickeychampion.net. It won her a Grammy nomination for Best Female Traditional Vocalist and Best Comeback Artist.

One of the unpredictable Mickey's classic lines runs "I got my left leg on the table, right leg on the floor, if you don't do me baby, I don't want you anymore." Other antics include in-concert "walking tours". One such starts when she drops off mike, creeps behind the bar, climbs on a table, jumps down and heads for the door, walks out down the sidewalk, ambles into a corner liquor store, buys a bottle of hard stuff, and retraces her steps, all the while singing and staying in tempo with the band. On another occasion, she'll sing and bellow while riding up and down an escalator. Mickey Champion seems to go on forever.

OPAL LOUIS NATIONS, 2008

With help from Dahle Scott, Nat Dove, Dan Kochakian, Aletha Rodgers, Lee Hildebrand and Jonathan Hodges

Labels courtesy Victor Pearlin. Adverts courtesy Galen Gart (ed) First Pressings: A History of R&B Vol 3 (1952) (Big Nickel, USA). Photographs courtesy Opal Louis Nations except where noted.