Women, Nicknames, and Blues Singers

James K. Skipper, Jr., and Paul L. Leslie

A nickname may be defined as a name not derivative from, or a diminutive of, a person's given names, but one which is added to, substituted for, or used alternatively with a person's given names. As reviewed elsewhere (Skipper, "Significance of Nicknames"), nicknames are an important and deeply embedded element in American culture, but there has been little systematic research reported in the literature. This is true not only for onomastics, but also for such disciplines as history, sociology, psychology, and so forth. What little research has been done usually focuses on the nicknames of males. With few exceptions, the nicknames of females have almost been entirely ignored.

The purpose of this report is to review the little we know about the use of nicknames in American society and especially those of women, analyze a set of women's nicknames derived from a study of American Blues singers 1890-1975, present a conceptual orientation by which to better understand the role of women's nicknames in American society, and suggest some avenues for future research.

Previous Research

Existing research suggests that nicknames are more common during childhood and adolescence than during adult life, and more common among men than women (Smith; Van Buren). In a study of a high school class, Thomas Busse reports that 55% of the boys compared to 40% of the girls had nicknames, but the use was variable. In some instances a single person used the nickname, in others just family or friends, and in still others, family, friends and acquaintances. In almost all cases the nicknames were age specific, that is they were discarded by adulthood. James Skipper (1986a) found that nicknames were prevalent among both male and female coal miners, but were situation and group specific ("Nick-

names, Folk Heroes and Jazz Musicians"). They were only used by the coal miner's working group, and only when extracting coal below the surface of the earth.

Ron Harré mentions that in some cases nicknames with negative connotations have had such a powerful influence on individuals that it has caused them to undergo programs of self -reform to remove the stigma. In other cases individuals have spent years trying to live up to the positive characteristics implied by their nicknames. Both Emily Dexter and Edwin Lawson report research indicating that nicknames given to college students may have important social meanings which affect behavior. James Skipper ("Feminine Nicknames") found cases of feminine nicknames given to professional baseball players affecting their careers and private lives.

Unfortunately, this brief review summarizes most of the empirical research concerning nicknames. From a historical standpoint, the lack of attention paid to nicknames in general and women's nicknames in particular can be explained partially by the lack of a historical data base and partially by the traditional status of women in society. Most individuals' nicknames are not remembered much past their lifetimes unless fame is achieved. Nicknames are usually not included in official documents. For the general population there is no repository of nicknames. There are, however, compilations of the lives of certain categories of individuals who have achieved special attention. Some of these include nicknames. Examples are entertainers of various genre, military/political figures, professional athletes, and notorious criminals and deviants.

Using the available historical data, Skipper traced the use of nicknames from before the turn of the century through the 1970s for major league baseball players ("Significance of Nicknames"), baseball players in the black leagues ("Nicknames, Folk Heroes, and Assimilation") notorious criminals and deviants ("Norotrious Deviants and Criminals") jazz musicians ("Folk Heroes and Jazz Musicians"), college and professional football players ("Football's Great Players"), and, most recently, Blues singers (Skipper and Leslie). An analysis by time period indicated a similar pattern existed with each group. The percentage of individuals with public nicknames increased from the decades of the late 19th century, peaked during the 1910-1929 decades, then slowly declined to around 1950. After 1950 there were major and continuing declines in the percentage of individuals in each group accorded public nicknames. For example,

28% of jazz musicians beginning their careers between 1920-1929 had nicknames, but just 5% debuting between 1970-1977. The decline appears to have continued into the 1980s for each of the groups, but is yet to be documented.

A brief summary of Skipper's explanation for this phenomenon is as follows. It is his contention, as well as that of other researchers (e.g., Harré; Blount), that the use of nicknames implies a greater degree of intimacy, closeness, and personal identification than the use of given names and/or titles. He relates this to Americans' belief in folk heroes, that is, those persons usually of lower class origins who have risen to fame and fortune by power of their own skills, determination, and hard work. Folk heroes personified the American dream that anyone, be they so humble, could be successful. Such individuals are often accorded nicknames even by those who may not have ever met them, but identify with them. Over time, however, especially after WWII, Americans' belief in the folk hero has declined with the general shift in American society from a *Gemeinschaft* orientation to *Gesellschaft* type. In other words, there was a change from a sense of solidarity and common identity rooted in tradition and personal relationships to individualism, mobility, and impersonality. These changes in society are reflected in the reduced use of public nicknames.

Nicknames of women, of course, do not appear in the baseball and football data. Only a few womens' nicknames are found among the data on criminals and deviants and jazz musicians, too few, in fact, to subject to analysis. This is because few women are included in these groups. This in itself is an important finding, although not surprising. Its significance will be considered later. The only group investigated thus far that included enough females (and thus nicknames) to analyze was American blues singers. Even this group is too small (N=28) for much quantitative analysis. Nevertheless, the remainder of the report will be devoted to a discussion of the limited population available.

Procedures

In 1979 Sheldon Harris published *Blues Who's Who: A Biographical Dictionary of Blues Singers*. While Harris does not contend that all blues singers are included in his volume, a case can be made that data on 571 of

the most important ones are. More importantly, material on nicknames is provided. It should be kept in mind that the nicknames in Harris' volume as well as those of other collections used in previous surveys are what we have chosen to term "official" or public nicknames; they are the nicknames by which these individuals were known to the public and have been documented and recorded. They may or may not have been the nicknames used by friends, relatives and close acquaintances in everyday life. These usually have not been preserved (Skipper, "Baseball 'Babes' ").

Harris uses three admittedly nebulous criteria for inclusion in his biographical dictionary. First, a distinction is made between blues singers, and singers of the blues. Excluded are individuals who sang and recorded blues but whose basic repertoire was non-blues, such as ballads, show tunes, rock, country, and so forth. Second, the singer must conform to the traditional blues sound, form, and content. This includes such factors as lyrics based on black experience and heritage and/or social/ personal subject matter, free expressiveness within recognized bar structures, and blue notes. Finally, peer group acceptance as a blues singer, critical writings, opinions, discographical listings and total blues work were taken into consideration. From 1890 through 1977, 571 blues singers meet Harris' criteria.

Analysis

There was sufficient information to make a determination of whether an individual had an official nickname for all but two of the artists. Male Blues singers 464 (82%) outnumbered females 105 (28%) at a better than four to one ratio. Two-thirds of the male blues singers (67%) had nicknames compared to about one-third (29%) of the females. The percentage of blues singers with nicknames follows the pattern mentioned previously. The nicknames peak in the 1920s and the greatest decline occurs after 1950. However, the interest here is more with an analysis of the female nicknames, than with the total population. Ninety (86%) of the 105 women were black, 13 (12%) were white and we were unable to determine the race of two (2%). Twenty-seven (29%) of the black female blues singers had nicknames, but just one (8%) (Joanne Horton) of the white singers had a nickname.

Table 1 presents the 28 female blues singers, their decade of debut, and their most common nicknames. One of the first steps in the systematic

Table 1. Nicknames of Female Blues Singers.

Blues Singer	*Debut Decade*	*Most Common Nickname(s)*
Elizabeth Douglas	1900-1909	"Memphis Minnie," "Kid"
Leola Grant	1900-1909	"Coot"
Gertrude Rainey	1900-1909	"Ma"
Bessie Smith	1900-1909	"Empress of the Blues"
Ida Brown	1910-1919	"Baby Blues"'
Laura Dukes	1910-1919	"Little Laura"
Bertha Hill	1910-1919	"Chippie"
Hattie McDaniel	1910-1919	"Hi Hat Hattie"
Clara Smith	1910-1919	"Violet"
Beuala Wallace	1910-1919	"Sippie"
Ethel Waters	1910-1919	"Sweet Mama Stringbean"
Edith Wilson	1910-1919	"Aunt Jemima"
Louisa Barker	1920-1929	"Blue Lu," "Lu Blue"
Catherine Crippen	1920-1929	"Little Katie"
Mary Johnson	1920-1929	"Signifyin"'
Josephine Miles	1920-1929	"Evangelist Mary,"
Irene Scruggs	1920-1929	"Chocolate Brown" "Little Sister"
Addie Spivey	1920-1929	"Sweet Pea," "Sweet Peases"
Elton Spivey	1920-1929	"Za Zu Girl"
Viola Wells	1920-1929	"Miss Rhapsody"
Estell Yancey	1920-1929	"Mamma"
Mabel Smith	1930-1939	"Big Maybelle"
Matilda Witherspoon	1930-1939	"Mississippi Matilda"
Beatrice Booze	1940-1949	"Wea Bea"
Joanne Horton	1940-1949	"Pug"
Esther Phillips	1940-1949	"Little Esther"
Willa Mae Thornton	1940-1949	"Big Mama"
Beverly Hill	1960-1969	"Big Mama Bev"

study of any set of names is to develop a scheme of classification. One way to do this is to begin with two generic categories based on whether the origin of the nickname indicates if it is directly related to singing the blues or, to something else. Our next step was to allow the nicknames themselves and the situational factors of their origin and meaning to suggest subcategories.

As yet, we have not been able to ascertain the origins of four of the artists' nicknames – Mary Johnson, "Signifyin"; Clara Smith,"Violet"; Addie Spivey, "Sweet Pea"; and Elton Spivey, "Za Zu girl." Until further information becomes available, we will assume that none of these four nicknames are directly related to blues singing. This means then that just eight (29%) of the women blues singers' nicknames are directly or indirectly related to their occupation. "Blue Lou" referred to Louisa Barker's blues singing, and "Miss Rhapsody" referred to Viola Well's frequent singing of the tunes, "Rhapsody in Rhythm" and "Rhapsody in Song." As a teen, Ida Brown appeared in a musical comedy, "Baby Blues," and carried that nickname ever after. Hattie McDaniel was accorded the nickname "Hi-Hat Hattie" because she played the drums as well as sang. Billing partners gave rise to the nicknames of Gertrude Rainey, "Ma" and "Pa" Rainey, and Estella Yancy, "Ma" and "Pa" Yancy. Irene Scruggs began her career with a nickname which called attention to her skin color, "Chocolate Brown," but she later became better known as "Little Sister" when she began playing and recording with Eurreal Montgomery whose nickname was "Little Brother" (Feather). Bessie Smith was called "Empress of the Blues" because of a consensus that she was the best female blues vocalist.

At least 16 (59%), and if you count the four nicknames for which origins have not yet been ascertained, as many as 20 (64%) of the blues singers' nicknames were not related to their occupation. On the basis of their origin and meaning the nicknames may be divided into five categories, of which the first is *distinguishing physical characteristics*. Three indicate large body size – Mabel Smith, "Big Maybell"; Willa Mae Thornton, "Big Mama"; and Beverly Hill, "Big Mama Bev." Four nicknames denote the small stature of the blues singers – Laura Dukes, "Little Laura"; Catherine Crippen, "Little Katie"; Esther Phillips, "Little Esther"; and Beatrice Booze, "Wea Bea." Ethel Waters began her career as a tall and thin teenager and was called "Stringbean" and later "Sweet

Mama Stringbean." Joanne Horton's nickname "Pug" called attention to her nose.

Three of the nicknames were placed in the category of *distinguishing personality/behavioral characteristics.* Leola Grant's nickname "Coot" meant her cute personality. "Sippie," for Beuala Wallace, was a carryover from her childhood lisp. Josephine Miles was dubbed "Evangelist Mary" because of her religious orientation. There were two placename nicknames which formed a third category. Matilda Witherspoon, "Mississippi Matilda," was born in Mississippi. Elizabeth Douglas, "Memphis Minnie," left home at age 13 and began working the streets of Memphis. When she first started her career she was called "Kid" as well, referring to her age. Age is the fourth category. Bertha Hill was nicknamed "Chippie" by a night club owner early in her career as a teenager. It meant young. Unlike the "Kid" for Elizabeth Douglas, "Chippie" remained with Bertha Hill for her life time. Finally, Edith Wilson's nickname, "Aunt Jemima", represents a fifth category—*fictional characters.* Wilson was sponsored by and toured for the Quaker Oats Company. She was dressed and made up to look like the picture of the black woman prominently displayed on their products.

Discussion

The data indicate that female blues singers are less likely to be accorded nicknames than male blues singers. This follows the same pattern reported in the previous studies. The black female artists are more likely than their white counterparts to receive nicknames. This also happens to be equally true of the males, and is not surprising since the blues is usually associated with black culture. It is more surprising that so few nicknames are directly associated with blues singing, the very reason why Harris classified them together.

Distinguishing physical characteristics are used more as a basis for nicknaming than those that might refer to the singing. For instance, there is no "Blue Note Nancy," "Low Note Laura," "Shouting Ester," "Sally, the Screecher," and so forth. Yet this too is characteristic of males in this study and in the research populations mentioned previously. For example, the most common nickname among male blues singers is "Blind," and among major league baseball players, "Red" and "Lefty." Nor are the

other categories, distinguishing personality/behavioral characteristics, placenames, age, and fictional characters unique to women. All have been identified with men as well in previous research populations. The major difference, then, between men and women is not the type of nickname accorded, but the greater percentage of men who receive them. The question is, how can this difference be explained? Certainly no definitive conclusions can be offered on the basis of this small data set, nor on the little other fragmentary evidence available. It is useful, however, to use this preliminary research as a base upon which to offer hypotheses and suggest further lines of inquiry.

Traditionally, in American society, men have been expected to work and support their families. Role attributes include an outward orientation, objectivity, self confidence, independence, and competitiveness: the good provider role. Women on the other hand, have been expected to be in the home, keeping house and raising children. Subjectivity, empathy, sensitivity, dependency, supportiveness, and an inward orientation are the role attributes associated with women: the homemaker role. The patriarchal nature of the gender role differentiation in American society all but excluded women from any form of occupational status. Women, if they worked outside the home, were relegated to such jobs as clerks, secretaries, nurses, librarians, and teachers. Even those women who worked in "men's" occupations tended to be less successful and scarcer every rung up the status ladder.

This means that women did not as often enter those fields of endeavor which have been singled out to be worthy of chronicling the lives of leading practitioners. When women did, they were not as likely to be as "successful" as men. The most striking example of this is with notorious criminals and deviants. Even in the area of soiled identities, few women have a claim to fame, from mass murderers to saboteurs, and from embezzlers to gang-land bosses. The significance for nicknames is three-fold. First, fewer women will be found in fields of endeavor where nicknames have been documented. Second, where women have, they have not been as successful as men since success has been measured by male standards and therefore they have been less likely to be nicknamed. Third, even when women have been successful, they are less likely to be accorded the attributes of the folk hero, and are less likely to receive a nickname. Remember, the Horatio Alger stories were about men, not women.

A second major factor, although not unrelated to the traditional female role, is the fact that men, not women, have been the prime nicknamers. It is difficult to document the origins of nicknames, and even more difficult to document the person or persons responsible for assigning nicknames. Even living respondents we have contacted are sometimes fuzzy in accessing exactly to whom credit should be given for their own nicknames! However, in the cases we have documented, it is almost always a man that is given credit. Only in cases of nicknames from childhood are women responsible, and even this is rare. It is our hypothesis that men are much more likely to nickname other men than women.

If our assessment is valid, then several things would seem to follow. First, one would not expect to find a higher percentage of women with public nicknames in any other populations similar to the ones already investigated. Second, one would expect to find a higher percentage of nicknames for women in lines of endeavor where only women participated and only women were responsible for the nicknaming. Unfortunately, thus far we have not been able to discover an example of such a population in which the lives of the practitioners have been documented and preserved, let alone included nicknames. An alternative method of testing this hypothesis would be to compare college fraternities and sororities. One would expect little or no difference in the percentage of members' nicknames, although there might be a difference in the types of nicknames. Finally, as women become more integrated on an equal basis into those occupational activities traditionally reserved for men, one would expect a higher percentage to be successful, a higher percentage of women becoming nicknamers, and a higher *percentage* of women nicknamed, in comparison to men. This does not mean, however, that there is likely to be a larger *number* of women's nicknames. The number is likely to be smaller if the general decline in the use of public nicknames continues.

It is unfortunate that more data concerning the nicknames of women are not available. Even in the field of onomastics the history and culture of women has been neglected. While this report hardly remedies the situations, it does highlight the need for further research. We hope that it will stimulate others to pursue the subject with the vim, vigor, and verve that it deserves.

University of North Carolina at Greensboro

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