Mothers and Sisters: Instrument and Idiom in the Music of Maybelle Carter, Memphis Minnie and Sister Rosetta Tharpe

by

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Abstract

This thesis contains a set of studies analysing the idiotechne, or individual playing style, of three pioneering female popular guitar players: Maybelle Carter (1909-1978); Memphis Minnie (1897-1973); and Sister Rosetta Tharpe (1915-1973). The main aim of the thesis is to identify and examine how these seminal artists operated within, and contributed to, their respective genres and in so doing, expand the current field of idiotechne studies of guitarists in American popular music. An examination of these particular players will also contribute to a more comprehensive and gender-inclusive history of the instrument.

The study begins with a critical review of the relevant scholarly literature surrounding the popular guitar, an introduction to the main subjects, and a discussion of the analytical methods used within the study. The thesis offers a framework for popular guitar idiotechne analysis, based on Moore’s theories of idiolect identification (2005; 2012), in particular the assessment of a player’s interaction within, and beyond, their stylistic context. As such, the study of each player in this thesis is supported by relevant historical sources (Boyer 1979; Evans 1982; 2001; Heilbut 2002; Malone 2010), in order to demonstrate how these players operated within their styles, as well as introduced approaches that were later adopted within general guitaristic and musical practice.

The three main chapters of the thesis contain extensive technical analyses supported by original transcriptions. Key attributes for each player are identified and examined, including 1) Maybelle Carter’s modular comping patterns, integrated thumb-lead style, and melodic shadowing, 2) Memphis Minnie’s melodic mapping, master and seed riffs, and creative engagement with call-and-response, and 3) Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s active comping, master chords and riffs, and musical and performative gestures.

The final section of the thesis reviews the main findings of the project, and offers suggestions for further research.
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Chapter 1

Introduction to the Study

From the acoustic guitars played by early country and blues artists, to the newly amplified instruments that propelled swing-band rhythm sections and urban blues combos, to the solid-body electrics wielded by rock players, the guitar has been an integral feature of popular music throughout the twentieth century. Having become “virtually synonymous” (Coelho 2003, p. 6) with many sub-genres of popular music, academics have noted it difficult to “over-emphasize” the importance of the instrument (ibid.). Considering the integral role of the instrument and the influence of its practitioners on the contemporary music soundscape, popular guitar research is of value from both a musicological and pedagogical perspective. While research within various areas of the field has been undertaken, further “serious and ongoing academic study” (Dawe 2010, p. 41) is required.

The aim of this study is to contribute to the field of popular guitar research by studying the idiotechne, or individual playing style, of three pioneering guitarists; Maybelle Carter (1909–1978), Memphis Minnie (1897–1973), and Sister Rosetta Tharpe (1915–1973)\(^1\). As commercially successful artists within various streams of early recorded American popular music (country, blues and gospel), these players were key figures in shaping the role of the guitar in early twentieth century recorded music, and the analyses contained within the three main chapters of this thesis primarily aims to elucidate the specifics of their musical development and approaches to playing. The primary research question for this study is:

- What are the constituent facets of the idiotechnes of Maybelle Carter, Memphis Minnie and Sister Rosetta Tharpe?

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\(^1\) In the context of this study, the term idiotechne is defined as a musician’s instrumental craft in relation to their idiom. See section 1.4 in this chapter for a discussion of the conception and application of this terminology.
This question is addressed via close technical and musical analysis within each chapter. Additional supporting research questions include:

- In which ways did early musical experiences influence the development of each player’s idiotechne?
- In which ways did each player conform to, demonstrate creative engagement with, or disrupt the expected stylistic norms of their respective genre?
- Is there an identifiable development of idiotechne across each player’s respective recording career?

In addition to contributing to the current field of academic idiotechne and instrument studies, this study also aims to aid in the on-going construction of a comprehensive and gender-inclusive history of the guitar in popular music.

1.1 Literature Review

To date, much of the history of the guitar in popular music can be located within various populist sources, including articles and tutorials in “niche magazines and journals” (Coelho 2003, p. xi), and biographies and instrument histories published by “guitar-writers and journalists [who] display a vast knowledge of the guitar world and its players, styles and technologies” (Dawe 2010, p. 19). Much of the earliest scholarly writing on the guitar assessed the broad history of the instrument, as well as musical developments and significant personalities within the classical and jazz spheres (Grunfeld 1969; Evans 1977; Turnbull 1974; Wade 1980; Mongan 1981).

The blossoming discipline of popular music studies, loosely defined by its interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of popular music, brought into focus the academic study of the guitar within popular genres. Robert Walser’s article ‘Eruptions: Heavy Metal Appropriations of Classical Virtuosity’ (1992) assessed guitar virtuosity in heavy metal, with a focus on the musical and technical approaches of Ritchie Blackmore, Eddie Van Halen, Randy
Rhodes and Yngwie Malmsteen. Andrew Cohen’s ‘The Hands of Blues Guitarists’ (1996) interrogated the concept of regional playing styles amongst blues guitarists via an analysis of the right-hand approaches of 94 players. Articles such as these, published in peer-reviewed academic journals, began the process of bringing genres and practitioners, long the focus of niche magazines, into the academic sphere.

Steve Waksman’s *Instruments of Desire* (2001) marked a “new epoch” (Dawe 2010, p. 50) in guitar research, providing a full length, multi-disciplinary study of the electric guitar, tracing the history of the instrument and some of its significant practitioners (Charlie Christian, Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy Page), while exploring the cultural significance of the instrument in regard to race, gender and technology\(^2\). Further cultural studies of the instrument were provided by Dawe and Bennett (eds.) in *Guitar Cultures* (2001), a publication focusing on the “global phenomenon” (p. 1) of the guitar and drawing together academics from multiple disciplines to examine “how, why and in what ways people use the guitar in the musical construction of self, others and communities” (ibid.). A chapter written by blues scholar David Evans, entitled ‘The Guitar in the Blues Music of the Deep South’, examines the guitar within one of the foundational streams of popular music. Evans notes the vast nature of his chosen subject, and offers a framework for further research, still “needed to fill in the details” (p. 11).

Victor Coelho’s (ed.) *Cambridge Companion to the Guitar* (2001), offers a history of the instrument “not simply about music, but about the interactions of players and (sub)cultures of all types” (p. xi). Broken into three main sections, the volume explores the classical guitar in the Baroque and Contemporary period, new guitar histories and world traditions and the guitar in jazz, roots, and rock music. Research surrounding the guitar in popular music in this volume is offered in five essays; the first three explore the role of the guitar within jazz, blues and country music during the 20\(^{th}\) century. An additional two essays, written by Steve Waksman, focus closely on the guitar in rock, from the 1950s to the 1970s, and the 1980s

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\(^2\) Waksman’s 2001 publication is largely drawn from his 1998 PhD thesis of the same name.
onwards. Andre Millard’s (ed.) *The Electric Guitar: The History of An American Icon* (2004) focuses on the electric guitar as a “technology”, with an aim to “investigate, in an interdisciplinary manner, some of the meanings and functions of this technology” (p. 14). In addition to exploring material innovations made in the development of the electric instrument, and the subsequent musical innovations of its significant practitioners, Millard addresses the cultural construction of the guitar hero/guitar god figure. John Strohm contributes a chapter that addresses gender issues within the field, exploring the marginalization and overlooked contributions of female guitarists in rock. Strohm’s work intersects with an earlier essay written by Mavis Bayton, a scholar whose work focuses on gender and performance in popular music. In a chapter entitled ‘Women and the Electric Guitar’ (1997), included within the seminal study on gender in popular music *Sexing the Groove* (Whiteley 1997), Bayton offers culturally informed explanations as to the absence of female electric guitar players.

Supporting a theory that women have been historically marginalized as instrumental performers and innovators, and often “written out of history” (1997, p. 37), Bayton insists that “there are no physical reasons for a lack of female guitarists” (ibid., p. 39) in popular music, and that marginalization of women in the field stems from issues entirely social in nature. While the author astutely identifies a number of issues marginalizing women as performers on the guitar, including a lack of role-models, she imputes the electric guitar as the main cause, stating that the arrival of the instrument “led to the exclusion of women” (ibid., p.

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3 Although issues of marginalization and excription have long oppressed women in music, it was not until the 1980s that musicologists began to actively explore the experiences of female performers and composers in western music. As these explorations flourished, analysis of the musical experiences of women from a critical feminist perspective began to develop, revealing issues of cultural and institutional marginalization that had historically restricted their activities. While much of this early work focused on art music within the western tradition, it in turn inspired the application of similar methods of historical and critical analyses to the popular canon. While authors such as Gaar (1992) and O’Brien (1995) undertook broad historical and biographical explorations of female pop musicians, scholars such as Whiteley (1997; 2000), Bayton (1998) and Leonard (2007) focused more closely on the relationship between gender and sexuality in popular music, using a variety of methodological approaches. While the initial selection of subjects in this thesis was driven by an interest in the contributions of female players within the male-dominated history of the popular guitar, it became apparent that Carter, Minnie and Tharpe were innovative and successful players, independent of gender, who had been largely under-studied. While there is certainly much work still to be done within academia and beyond in regards to addressing the continued gender disparity within the field, it is felt that establishing and elucidating the great skill, innovation and influence of these pioneering women is the most effective way for me, a female practitioner and researcher, to contribute to redressing the balance.
38), due to its masculine connotations and strong associations with technology. Bayton’s arguments intersect with the findings of Waksman’s (2001) study of masculinity and the electric guitar, and both studies answer many questions surrounding the cultural reasons for the lack of female representation within the field. However, neither Bayton nor Waksman attempt a close examination of the technical approaches or musical contributions of female practitioners within the male dominated history of popular guitar performance.

Dawe’s *New Guitarscape in Critical Theory, Cultural Practice and Musical Performance* (2010), draws on Appadurai’s theory of ‘scapes’, offering the term “guitarscape”, as a concept that “encapsulate[s] readily the phenomenal popularity of the guitar (or the popular phenomenon that is the guitar)” (p. 41). Dawe notes that “to date, the study of the contemporary world of the guitar had been, at best, limited” (p. 20), and argues for continued robust study of various facets of the instrument. Within his study, Dawe pushes deeply into the concept of the guitar as a global cultural phenomenon, assessing the instrument “among the societies and cultures of the world, whilst drawing on studies of material culture, technology, new media, the body and senses, cognition, gender and sexuality and globalization” (p. xviii). In addition to chapters examining the concept of “guitarscaping”, or as Dawe defines it, the “use and application of the guitar in music (well beyond but also including strident solos and chord vamping)” (p. 64), Dawe examines the “virtual” life of the guitar in the 21st century, and devotes a chapter to the exploration of ‘Gender and Sexuality in the New Guitarscape’.

While a handful of other journal articles have addressed the cultural aspects of the popular guitarscape (Goertzel 1991; McSwain 1995; Bourdage, 2010), a small number of theses have offered close musical and technical analyses of the idiotechne of innovative players. These include; *The Improvisational Style of Charlie Christian* (Spring 1980), *The Blues Guitar Style of BB King* (Richardson 1987), *An Analysis of Freddie Green’s Style and his Importance in the History of Jazz Guitar*’ (Dickert 1994), *The Music of Django Reinhardt* (Givan 2003), and *An Examination of Eddie Lang’s Technique and Textural Treatment in Three Selected Solo Guitar*
Performances (Saladino 2012). In addition to providing biographical and stylistic context, each of these studies explores the development of the subject’s idiotechne, and catalogues the recurrent musical and technical elements that define it. Other notable theses which focus substantially, but not exclusively, on a player’s idiotechne include; The Development of the Electric Guitar Solo in Rock Music, 1954-1971 (Valdez, 1992), With the Power of Soul: Jimi Hendrix in Band of Gypsies (Hanford 2003), I Belong to the Band: The Music of Reverend Gary Davis (Ellis 2010), and Imitation, Assimilation, and Innovation: Charlie Christian’s Influence on Wes Montgomery’s Improvisational Style in his Early Recordings (1957-1960) (Salmon 2011).

![Figure 1.1 Existing academic popular guitar idiotechne studies](image)

### 1.2 Need for the Study and Objectives

Of the above noted studies, Saladino (2012), Dickert (1994), Givan (2003), Spring (1980) and Salmon (2011) broadly inform the history of the guitar in jazz, from the golden age through the bebop era, and into its modern period. Ellis (2010) and Richardson (1987) inform the history of the guitar within the genres of blues and gospel-blues, and Hanford (2003), the guitar in rock. While each of these studies offers valuable analysis of the idiotechnes of some of the most influential players of the 20th century, from the mid-1920s through the 1970s (see figure 1.1), they are notably few in number, relatively uniform in stylistic representation, and lack gender diversity. Therefore, a primary objective of this study is to expand and diversify
the current academic knowledge base of the idiotechnes of seminal players in early popular music.

As seen in figure 1.1 the current offering of studies is weighted toward jazz and blues players, with no attention to players in country, one of the fundamental streams of early American popular music (Ennis 1992). The inclusion in this study of one player active within early country music (Maybelle Carter), one within country and urban blues (Memphis Minnie), and one cross-over artist whose idiotechne bears hallmarks of blues, gospel and jazz influences (Sister Rosetta Tharpe), allows this project to diversify the current field of idiotechne studies in relation to genre. Similarly, no female practitioner has yet been the subject of a close study of this type. While women have been historically under-represented in the field, as noted by Bayton (1997) and Waksman (2001), the inclusion here of three commercially successful, innovative and influential female players adds a valuable layer of diversity to the current catalogue of academic studies, redressing the historic gender imbalance in the field through documenting the significant skill and contributions of women within the canon.

After selecting subjects for this study who reflected a diversity of genre and gender, a choice was also made to focus on players active within the first few decades of the early history of the guitar, necessary, as the current history of this period is incomplete.4 By filling some of the gaps in foundational historical knowledge of the popular guitar and its players, this project hopes to provide information for future academic studies, from both the early and later history of the instrument. Commercial success was the final criterion for inclusion in this

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4 For this study, the history of the guitar in popular music is conceived as falling into two broad periods; pre-1955 or ‘early’ and post-1955. The early period begins in the mid-1920s, marked by the advent of new recording technologies and “emerging musical niches, such as jazz, blues and country music” (Patmore 2009, p. 128), genres in which the guitar flourished. The second period begins in 1955, a year that marks the first commercial release by Chuck Berry. Waksman defines Berry as “the definitive guitarist” of the early rock n’ roll era (Coelho 2003, p. 111), and notes that during the mid-1950s, the electric guitar, in the hands of Berry and other key figures became “as central to the substance” of rock n’ roll “as it was to the style of […] performance” (ibid., p. 112). Considering the overwhelming mainstream popularity of rock n’ roll beginning in 1955, and the position of the guitar as a central figure, 1955 is considered a watershed year in the history of the instrument.
study, ensuring that each player had a wide audience within and outside of guitar communities, in order to facilitate an assessment of their significance within the canon, and subsequent influence.

1.3 Introduction to Subjects

Chapter two focuses on Maybelle Carter, one of the most innovative players in early American popular music. Carter excelled as a member of the Carter Family, one of the earliest commercially successful country music groups. First recording for Victor Records in 1927, the Carter Family went on to record almost 300 songs during the next 14 years for Victor, Decca and ARC Records (Zwontizer 2002). Central to Maybelle’s legacy is her development of a then-unique playing style, known as the Carter Scratch, which has become one of the most widely imitated acoustic styles in popular music and is the basis of the country guitar sound. Carter’s innovation allowed her to be self-sufficient as a guitarist, playing lead melodies and rhythm at the same time. Her approach to playing defined the Carter Family sound, and her Carter Scratch technique went on to be “copied by every country guitarist for 50 years” (Waksman 2001, p. 278). As well as developing her own highly influential approach to playing lead, Carter incorporated a number of other traditional techniques including slide and fingerstyle, and her engagement with these traditions will also be examined. The Carter Family have been studied in the context of their pioneering position as the first commercially successful group in country music, as has their unique approach to arrangement, of which Carter’s guitar style is an integral component (Zwonitzer 2002; Olson and Wolfe, 2005; Rockwell 2011). While there is one commercially available transcription set of Carter Family songs (Sokolow 1999) and one tutorial DVD (Seeger 2000) that examines the basics of her playing style, the nuances of Maybelle Carter’s idiotechne have not yet been thoroughly examined.

The focus of chapter three is Memphis Minnie, a performer who first gained commercial success in the country-blues genre. Minnie recorded hundreds of sides between
1929 and 1953 for a number of companies, including Columbia, Decca and Victor Records. She began playing the guitar at age 11 and forged a reputation as a blues performer as a teenager. In 1929, Minnie and her then-husband, Kansas Joe McCoy, had their first recording session with Columbia Records, cutting a number of hit songs including ‘Bumble Bee’ (Columbia 14542-D) and ‘When the Levee Breaks’ (Columbia 14439-D). Minnie went on to record with numerous ensembles, always playing lead guitar. She also recorded a number of solo records, on which she sang and accompanied herself, showcasing impressive country blues fingerstyle skills. By the late 1930s, Minnie was an integral member of the Chicago blues community, as players there began transitioning towards an urban, electric blues sound. By the early 1940s, Minnie had begun to incorporate the electric guitar into her performances, with accounts of her engaging in cutting contests in the highly competitive Chicago blues scene, and her use of the electric guitar “proved to be a formative influence upon the sound of the Chicago blues” (Waksman 2001, p. 122). Select studies and articles (Oliver 1972; Garon 1992) have identified Minnie as an exceptional figure in the history of the blues, and one commercially available tutorial DVD (Del Rey 2014) illuminates her basic approach to playing. However, a thorough examination of her idiotechne has not yet been undertaken.

Chapter four focuses on Sister Rosetta Tharpe, a unique figure in the history of popular music. While Tharpe is credited with helping introduce sacred music to secular audiences, and for gaining success as one of the first female gospel crossover artists, perhaps the most exceptional aspect of Tharpe’s musicianship was her virtuosity and unique approach to playing. Beginning her career on the gospel circuit as a child, she became known for her powerful voice, charismatic persona and exceptional guitar skill. In 1938, Tharpe recorded her first commercial hit with Decca Records, and went on to record over 100 sides for that label, in addition to a dozen LPs during the 1950s and 60s for companies including Mercury and Savoy Records. Demonstrating significant versatility as an artist, Tharpe recorded solo sides, in addition to hits with swing jazz big bands, early R&B piano combos and gospel groups.
During the 1960s, Tharpe toured Europe, appeared in televised performances in the US and the UK, and earned a Grammy nomination for her 1968 album *Precious Memories*. While Tharpe’s guitar vocabulary bears the hallmarks of gospel, blues and jazz, her systematic approach to playing rhythm and lead is unlike that of almost any of her predecessors or contemporaries. To the present, Tharpe’s idiotechne has not been the focus of any extensive academic study, published transcription sets or tutorials, despite being frequently cited as a pioneering guitar player (Millard 2004; Wald 2007; Fast 2008), and an induction into the 2018 ‘Rock n’ Roll Hall of Fame’ as an ‘Early Influence’ 5.

1.4 Methodology

A framework work for the analysis of idiotechne has been conceived for this study in order to identify the key attributes of each subject’s playing style, through a corpus analysis, assessment of adherence to stylistic norms (both sonic and somatic), technical analysis of physical approaches and musical analysis of melodic and harmonic language, aided by extensive transcriptions. This framework is shown below in figure 1.2;

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5 For more information on Tharpe’s induction into the Rock n’ Roll Hall of Fame see https://www.rockhall.com/class-2018-inductees (Accessed 22 December 2017).
The framework for analysis, as shown above, was intended to be robust, yet flexible, allowing for its application to the analysis of different subjects from diverse genres, with a relatively consistent outcome.

The work of popular musicologist Allan Moore offered some important guidance in the initial stages of formulating this framework. Moore argues for the refinement of the concept of style, a term that is frequently used to describe a guitarist’s individual approach to playing. Moore defines style as “the manner of articulation of musical gestures”, (2012, p. 120), noting that it operates at various hierarchical levels, and goes on to offer the term idiolect to define “style at the most local of levels” (ibid), describing idiolect as the “stylistic fingerprints” of an “individual musician(s)” (2012, p. 166). While the framework in discussion here is considered a branch of idiolect analysis, the term idiotechne has been conceived for this
project in order to define a musician’s instrumental craft in relation to their idiom, acknowledging the role of the instrument, and the practitioner’s embodied cognition, within the creative process\(^6\). Devising this new terminology, which is related to but distinct from the term idiolect, allows for the specifics of instrumental approach (the main focus of this study) to be differentiated from other idioleotical characteristics.

Moore also offers some directions for approaching analysis of this nature, primarily suggesting that the key to the identification of idiolect, or in this context idiotechne, “is recognition of the normative practices of one or more musicians” within a particular style (2012, p. 167). For this study, the anticipated stylistic norms for each players representative genre were identified, and sub-divided into two categories; sonic and somatic. In this context, sonic norms are considered the harmonic, melodic and rhythmic vocabulary traditionally used within a particular style, such as pentatonicism in blues or heightened chromaticism in jazz. Somatic norms are the physical techniques and expressive gestures related specifically to guitar playing, such as string bends, glissandi or cross-string articulations. These anticipated norms were catalogued and presented at the outset of the analytical sections within each chapter (see figures 2.4, figure 3.5 and figure 4.3).

As can be seen in figure 1.2, another initial distinction was to consider the functional role of the guitar in popular music, and the player’s engagement with those roles. Within the “four textural layers” typically found in popular music (Moore 2012, p. 20), the guitar frequently “inhabit[s]” the melodic layer, colloquially known as lead guitar, and harmonic filler layer, known as rhythm guitar (Moore 2012, p. 20-21). Additionally, the guitar often functions in the explicit rhythm layer, as heard in the songs of early blues musicians such as Robert Johnson (Moore 2001, p. 36). Similarly, the guitar often inhabits the bass layer, as heard in the alternating and walking bass lines of early country guitar players. While the guitar’s ability to function in all layers of the musical soundscape may account in part for its “relative supremacy

\(^6\) The term *idio* is derived from the greek word for personal, and *techne* is derived from the greek word for craft.
in the instrumental hierarchy of pop music” (Waksman 2001, p. 116), independently assessing the ways in which a guitarist navigates the roles of rhythm and lead player within the soundscape allowed for a further refinement of the analytical process.

As can be seen in figure 1.2, a chronological corpus analysis of each player was undertaken, supported by Moore’s statement that a study of idiolect (or in this context, idiotechne), “can only properly be approached through close attention to [an artist’s] recorded output” (2005, p. 141). While the examination of each subject across the scope of their recorded career aided the broad understanding of the player’s stylistic development, it also allowed for a general assessment of the player in relation to the previously identified set of stylistic norms. As “particular tendencies” (ibid.) in relation to said norms became apparent, the identification of these tendencies allowed for an initial definition of the subject’s idiotechne. In the context of this study, the term idiotechnique has been conceived and used to describe a unique or identifying facet of a player’s idiotechne, beneficial due to the focus of this study.

As previously noted, while the number of academic studies that closely focus on analysing the idiotechne of popular guitar players is few, this process of identification and focus on particular tendencies or idiotechniques is incorporated in varying degrees by each scholar, albeit using different terminology. In an assessment of B.B. King’s idiotechne, Richardson (1987) identifies certain recurrent “idiomatic and stylistic devices” (p. 82), with a tendency toward the use of motivic development and melodic call and response. Dickert’s (1994) study of Freddie Green’s idiotechne focuses on the guitarist’s unique approach to harmony and voice-leading, and identifies recurrent progressions and turnarounds heard across his catalogue.

The close analysis of the idiotechniques, or identifying facets, of a subject’s idiotechne moved this project into a more sharply focused phase of analysis and here, other analytical foci utilised in similar studies were incorporated. In a music-centered study of Reinhardt’s
improvisations, Givan catalogues the players “improvisational formulae” (2003, p. i) and consistently links these formulas directly to Reinhardt’s chosen idiom. Further, Givan devotes an entire chapter to Reinhardt’s unique physical approach, affected by a hand injury sustained as a young man, which fundamentally shaped his sonic and somatic idiotechne. William Ellis’ extensive analytical examination of the music of gospel-blues artist Rev. Gary Davis focuses on his “vast repertoire and instrumental virtuosity” (2010, p. iv). In addition to assessing Davis’ physical technique and identifying recurrent musical gestures, Ellis identifies Davis’ use of alternate tunings and his engagement with the six and 12-string guitar as a fundamental facet of his idiotechne. These focused lines of analysis, drawn from existing academic research were incorporated in this study, where applicable.

The three main case studies in this thesis begin with a biographical examination of each player, as well as an attempt to survey the role of the guitar within their respective genres, with much of this information being drawn from existing literature. All of the subjects in this study are women who excelled within a field historically dominated by men, therefore each chapter briefly assesses gendered performance in each musician’s respective culture, and for context, has sought to locate any contemporaries.

Importantly, this study was undertaken by a trained and experienced practitioner, whose understanding of the process of these players, gained through learning and transcribing their music, was key to compiling this thesis. Each chapter includes annotated transcriptions in order to support analysis.

While the systematic approach to idiotechne analysis, outlined in figure 1.2, was used as a framework for each of the main studies in this thesis, the method was effectively flexible where necessary. Finally, each main chapter concludes with a brief assessment of the influence and impact of the subject, both on their contemporaries and within subsequent eras.

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7The consideration of gendered modes of musical learning and performance was largely influenced by Green (1997) and Whiteley (1997).
As noted, there are few commercially available guitar transcriptions of the music of Memphis Minnie or Maybelle Carter/The Carter Family, and currently none of Rosetta Tharpe. While all available transcriptions were obtained and reviewed for research purposes, the transcriptions in this thesis are original and were newly created in order to inform the analytical process. In the case of Maybelle Carter and Memphis Minnie, the transcriptions are derived from aural analysis of original recordings, and for Tharpe, both audio and video recordings have been used to aid the analysis of her playing and performing. Fortuitously, complete sets of the Carter Family and Memphis Minnie’s recorded catalogue are available on specialist labels, Bear Family Records (BCD15865) and Document Records (BDCD-6008 to BDCB-6012) respectively. Similarly, the complete recordings of Sister Rosetta Tharpe have been compiled by Fremeaux Records (FA1301 to FA1307). This set also includes a number of live concert recordings from the 1950s and 60s. Each of these sets contain historical and biographical information in liner-note form that have been drawn on, to varying degrees. Although each set has been meticulously compiled by the record companies, some of the audio quality is lacking in places, due to the constraints of recording technology in the late 1920s and early 1930s. At times this impeded transcription work, but has been noted where necessary.

Where available, video footage has been used to inform the analysis of physical playing style. Sadly, there is no existing footage of Memphis Minnie, however Maybelle Carter and Rosetta Tharpe both appeared on television during the late 1950s and early 1960s, and were also featured in brief live recordings intended for documentary footage. In addition to informing the analysis of physical playing style, in the case of Tharpe, video footage has also been used to inform a discussion of the performative aspects of her musical persona, which I define as deeply connected to her playing.

\[8\] Additionally, Document Records have released a 3-CD set of Tharpe’s complete recordings from 1938-1947 (DOCD 5334, DOCD 5335 and DOCD-5607).
Finally, audio interviews with Maybelle Carter discussing the development of her playing style have been obtained from the archives of the “Southern Folklife Collection” at the Wilson Library at UNC, Chapel Hill.
Chapter 2

Maybelle Carter (1909-1978)

During the summer of 1927, an historic recording session took place in Bristol, Tennessee, an event often considered “legendary” (Olson 2005, p. 18) in the history of American popular music due to the discovery of two of country music’s “most influential acts”; The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers (Malone 2010, p. 64). While these acts recorded only eight sides between them at the Bristol sessions, their recordings solidified the early commercial country music sound\(^9\), with the Carters and Rodgers emerging as the first “country music stars” (Olson 2005, p. 66)\(^10\). On 1 August, 1927, The Carter Family travelled 25 miles from their hometown of Maces Springs, Virginia to attend the session organised by Victor Records talent scout, Ralph Peer. The group consisted of A.P. Carter, his wife Sara and her younger cousin, Maybelle. While the musical style, song themes and image of the Carter Family were key in creating what became the most successful group in early country music, an essential element of their group, certainly for the purpose of this study, was the musical presence of Maybelle Carter. Only 18 years old at the time of the Bristol sessions, the young musician had developed an innovative approach to playing lead guitar that enabled her to play lead and rhythm at the same time. Becoming colloquially known as known as the Carter Scratch, the Carter Lick, or the Carter Style, Maybelle’s unique method of playing lead lines on the bass strings with her thumb, whilst simultaneously strumming chords on the treble strings “revolutionized the way [the guitar] was played” and would bring the instrument “to the front and center of the country music stage” (Sokolow 1999, p. 14). Her innovative style was a main “key to success of the Carter Family” (Doman 2005, p. 70); and went on to be one of the most widely imitated guitar styles in popular music history (Cash 1979).

\(^9\) For further information on the impact of these recordings see Malone (2010), p. 65.
\(^10\) For an in-depth account of the historic 1927 Bristol Sessions see Olson and Wolfe (2005).
Despite the success of the Carter Family, and Maybelle’s style becoming an ingrained part of the popular guitar vernacular in the twentieth century, there has been little academic research focusing on the specifics of her playing. Academics such as Rockwell (2011) and Townsend (2001) have undertaken a close analysis of the rhythmic practices of the Carter Family, with both essays acknowledging the importance of the lead guitar within the group. Ed Kahn’s thesis assesses the Carter Family within the context of the significant “changes that were taking place in [American] society during the period between the two great wars” (p. xiii), presenting fundamental historical and biographical information about the group. Country music scholar Charles Wolfe’s extensive liner notes accompanying the complete commercial recordings of the Carter Family, entitled *The Carter Family: In the Shadow of Clinch Mountain* (2000), also explores the history of the group and their influence on the development of country music (the recordings available in this exhaustive collection have been used for the musical transcriptions in this study). Zwonitzer’s, *Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone?: The Carter Family and their Legacy in American Music* (2002), presents a thorough biographical study of the Carter Family, elucidating the complete history of their recording and performing career, as well as the interpersonal relationships within the group. While each of the previous authors and scholars acknowledge the innovation and influence of Maybelle’s guitar style, there is minimal discussion of the specifics of her playing within their studies. Ethnomusicologists and practitioners have gone slightly further with this task, with Alan Lomax’s (1960) comprehensive 25-year study of North American folk music including a brief assessment of the ‘Carter Lick’. Lomax describes how to play the Carter Lick; “Start a good scratch going, as above […] With index finger keeping up the rhythm, pick out the melody on the bass strings with the thumb” (ibid., p. 603). Prior to this description, Lomax elucidates the technique he calls “The Scratch”:
The thumb plucks down on bass string and accounts for the first two beats [...] 

The index finger, held almost perpendicular to the strings, takes the third beat by moving down across the three treble strings, ‘scratching’ them with the back of the nail [...] Once down, the index finger immediately scratches back up across several of the treble strings for the fourth beat (ibid., p. 602).

Lomax describe the Scratch as ‘the most useful, easy lick for hillbilly songs, square dance tunes and lots more” (ibid.). This stratified approach to strumming chords was the standard for many early country guitarists, and was the foundation for the development of the Carter Style. Musicologist Bill Malone’s definitive study of country music history, Country Music USA (2010), identifies Maybelle Carter’s “much-copied guitar lead” describing it as a “thumb-brush technique” (p. 66). Malone states that with Carter’s approach, the “thumb picks the melody on the bass strings, while the fingers provide rhythm with a downward stroke of the treble strings” (ibid.), asserting, “this approach attracted generations of guitar pickers” (ibid). Mike Seeger, folklorist, music collector and practitioner, toured extensively with Maybelle during the 1960s (Seeger 2000) and together with Ed Kahn conducted interviews with Maybelle exploring the development and influence of her style. In a commercially available instructional DVD taught by Seeger, entitled The Guitar Styles of the Carter Family (2000), he defines Carter’s approach as a “thumb-lead” style (p. 10) and in the The Carter Family Collection (1999), a commercially available transcription book, practitioner and pedagogue Fred Sokolow states “The “Carter Scratch” [...] is what [Maybelle] called her basic rhythm lick when she taught it to her daughter June and granddaughter Carlene Carter. She played melody and bass runs with her thumb and brushed down and up with her fingers” (1999, p. 10). Sokolow goes on to further elucidate the components of what he describes as the basic lick; “1. Pick a bass string with your thumb. 2. Brush down on the two or three highest (treble) strings with the nail of
your index or middle finger. 3. Brush up on the treble strings with your index or middle finger” (ibid).

While the descriptions above vary slightly, what each of these perspectives acknowledges is Maybelle’s innovative integration of a melodic lead line played on the bass strings with her thumb, whilst strumming accompanimental chords on the treble strings with her fingers. Due to the integration of rhythm and lead guitar functions, and building on the perspective of Mike Seeger, in this study her approach will be referred to as an integrated thumb-lead style. One of the main aims of this chapter is to more fully define and understand the components of this innovative and influential lead style, in addition to exploring Carter’s incorporation of more traditional playing styles, including slide, flatpick and fingerstyle.

2.1 The Carter Family and Early Country Music

During the 1920s, the American recording industry began intensively recording both black and white folk musicians, marketing them within their respective communities in genres that became known as known as race and hillbilly records (Titon 1971, p. 7). Vernon Dalhart’s ‘Wreck of The Old 97’ (Victor 19427) sold over a million copies in 1924 (Malone 2010, pp. 61-62), signalling the “sudden commercial viability” (Neal 2002, p. 6) of hillbilly music. In the summer of 1927 Ralph Peer, producer and talent scout for Victor Records, set up a mobile recording studio in a warehouse in downtown Bristol, Tennessee, with the knowledge that a number of hillbilly musicians lived in the area (Olson 2005, p. 2). Established as a vital figure in the early 1920s race and hillbilly record industries, Peer had been involved in the seminal recording session for Okeh Records in 1920 that produced Mamie Smith’s ‘Crazy Blues’ (Okeh 4169), a song that “opened up the Race Records market and pushed the blues recording boom into high gear” (Wald 2005, p. 21). Peer had also been responsible for recording Fiddlin’ John Carson in 1923, whose ‘Little Old Log Cabin In The Lane’ (Okeh 4890) was the first commercially successful hillbilly recording (Malone 2010, p. 38).
The members of the Carter Family had been raised in the mountains of southwestern Virginia, where AP and Sarah met in 1914 (Zwonitzer 2002). The couple married the following year and soon began performing together as a duo. A.P. had been raised in a musical family, singing in church and learning to play the fiddle as a child, and Sara had learned to play the guitar, autoharp and banjo as a young girl, but was best known for her strong vocal abilities. Sara’s younger cousin Maybelle had also grown up in a musical family, learning to play the banjo, autoharp and guitar as a child. In 1926, Maybelle married Ezra “Eck” Carter, the younger brother of A.P., and shortly thereafter Sara, Maybelle and A.P. began performing together as The Carter Family. Between 1927 and 1941, the group recorded almost 300 songs for various record companies and gained tenure on national radio during the late 1930s and early 40s. Many Carter Family songs became “country standards” (Sokolow 1999, p. 14), and in 1970 the group were inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame.

The commercial success of the Carter Family can be attributed to a number of elements; perhaps primarily, the group’s musical roots were firmly grounded in the Appalachian folk tradition and their simple and unadorned musical style held great appeal for regional audiences. Most Carter Family songs featured two-part vocal harmonies sung by Sara and Maybelle, with the women typically accompanying themselves on autoharp and guitar respectively. The group relied heavily on arrangements of traditional material drawn from their regional musical vernacular, with A.P. traveling to communities throughout the Appalachian region on song hunting missions (Zwonitzer 2002). On his travels, A.P. sought previously unrecorded material that he, Sara and Maybelle would later re-arrange to suit the Carter Family style. While A.P. would sometimes add bass harmonies, and occasionally sing lead, his primary

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12 See Zwonitzer (2002), pp. 70, for information on Maybelle’s earliest musical experiences.
13 See Zwonitzer (2002), pp. 62-66 for information on the earliest musical meetings of the trio and as well as details on Maybelle and Eck’s marriage in 1926.
role was collecting musical material for the group. Sara and Maybelle handled the main musical responsibilities, with Sara typically singing lead, playing autoharp and occasionally playing rhythm guitar, while Maybelle played guitar and sang harmony. The Carter Family’s song texts were rooted in themes of domesticity and religion, with songs often “derived from the old ballad tradition” of the American south (Wolfe and Olson 2005, p.66) and they upheld a humble and unpretentious image, performing as a family unit whilst maintaining deep connections to home and community. This image reflected the lifestyle and values of many in their listeners, and added significantly to their commercial appeal.

Born May 10th, 1909 in Scott County, West Virginia, Maybelle Carter (nee Addington) was raised in a family and community that held music-making at the centre of everyday life, and young Maybelle was immersed in traditional musical practices from an early age. Maybelle describes pulling the “autoharp down off the table to the floor and trying to play it” (Carter 1962) while her mother would play the banjo, or playing the banjo herself to accompany her brother while he would play the guitar. Carter first began to play the guitar at age 13, and when asked whether she had any guitar idols when she first began to play, she replied, “there wasn’t too many of them back in my younger days” (Carter 1963).

Within the Appalachian mountain community, as in many American communities at the time, the women of the family worked primarily in the home while men engaged in work further afield. While women spent long hours tending to their homes, raising children and working the land on their homesteads, they often incorporated private music making as an integral part of daily lives. “Often singing ballads that had been handed down for centuries” (Bufwack and Oermann 2003, p. 4), and playing musical instruments such as the banjo, guitar, autoharp, dulcimer and fiddle, the musical experiences of Appalachian women during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were rich and varied. As “enthusiastic chroniclers of

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15 See Bufwack and Oermann (2003) for an extensive discussion of women in early country music.
folk music” (ibid., p. 15), the roots of early commercial country music can be traced to the women of the Appalachian south.

While the tradition of making music within the home was an integral part of domestic life, few rural southern inhabitants made a career as musicians. Although private musical endeavours within the home were acceptable for women, crossing culturally instilled boundaries of gender display rendered public performance spaces almost entirely inaccessible (ibid.). Maybelle and Sara Carter’s ability to transgress these established gender boundaries in rural America during the late 1920s, as singers and perhaps more significantly as instrumentalists, is an important aspect of their status as pioneers in the history of American popular music.

Although the women of the Carter Family occupy an important place in country music history, they were neither the first nor only female instrumentalists to record during the early period of the genre. However, the numbers were few, and only “five percent of country’s earliest recordings featured female performers” (ibid., p. 59). In April 1924, Samantha Bumgarner (banjo) and Eva Davis (fiddle) recorded as a duo for Columbia Records (167-D) with Bumgarner holding the position of one of the “first five string banjo players ever recorded” (Kingsbury and McCall 2012, p. 60). Singer and guitarist Roba Stanley recorded for Okeh Records in 1924, often playing with her father, fiddler Rob Stanley (see Bufwack and Oermann 2003). Rosa Lee Carson (1909-1992), the daughter of early country music pioneer Fiddlin’ John Carson, recorded numerous sides playing guitar and banjo with her father’s group, The Virginia Reelers, and later recorded a number of solo records under the stage name Moonshine Kate. Other notable early female country instrumentalists include fiddler Adylene Hood the musical partner and mistress of Vernon Dalhart, who recorded dozens of

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tracks for Victor Records, and fiddler Hattie Stoneman, who recorded at the 1927 Bristol Sessions with her husband, pioneering early country musician Ernest “Pop” Stoneman. Although these female musicians were able to gain limited commercial success as instrumental performers, it is notable that many were associated with successful male performers. Whether related to, or romantically involved with the men they performed with, they were likely necessarily linked to male performers in order to negotiate cultural boundaries imposed upon women. While Sara and Maybelle Carter can be heralded as autonomous and groundbreaking figures, they too were members of a group that was led by a male figure. In an examination of country music culture, Cecilia Tichi states “Maybelle and Sara Carter were very much, at least publicly, in the roles of the wife and sister-in-law under the care and protection of a patriarchal figure” (1994, p. 250). Although A.P. was an integral part of the group, he was notoriously unreliable as a performer, often wandering off during the middle of a performance or recording session (Zwonitzer 2002; Bufwack and Oermann 2003). Defined by his role as “song-collector, arranger and manager” (Ellison 1995, p. 28), A.P. was the logistical driving force behind the group, while Sara and Maybelle bore the main musical responsibilities. A.P. held the copyright for almost all of the songs within the Carter Family catalogue, negotiating contracts and royalties with Ralph Peer from the outset of the group’s recording career. While there appear to be many facets to the working dynamics of the Carter Family and their negotiations of traditional gender roles within the early popular music industry, what is clear is that both the group and Maybelle Carter left an indelible legacy.

Prior to the success of the Carter Family, the guitar had been a feature of the early 1920s commercial country music sound, however the main function of the instrument was primarily that of accompaniment. On early 1920s country recordings, the guitar was essentially used by singers to accompany themselves with simple strummed chord progressions or as part of the

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19 For further biographical information on these and other early country female performers see Bufwack and Oermann (2003), chapter 2.
rhythm section in a string band\textsuperscript{21}. Most players can be heard using simple open chords and playing in a stratified strumming style similar to that which Lomax described as the Scratch. Often synonymously referred to as a \textit{bass-strum} comping style\textsuperscript{22}, this approach requires players to strike the root note of a chord on the strong beats of a bar while playing the rest of the chord on the following beat;

![Figure 2.1 Typical 1920s country bass-strum accompaniment style.](image1)

An alternative bass note would often be used for added interest (figure 2.2), alternating the third or fifth of the chord above or below the given root;

![Figure 2.2 Typical 1920s country bass-strum accompaniment with alternating bass notes.](image2)

The inclusion of diatonic ‘walking bass’ runs connecting root notes of chords (as seen in figure 2.3) added interest to a simple bass-strum guitar part, allowing the instrument to act in place of a string bass which was often too cumbersome for travelling or too expensive for rural string players to purchase;

\footnote{\textsuperscript{21} See Ross (2003) for further discussion of the early country music string band genre.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{22} This approach to playing rhythm has many vernacular names. In addition to calling it a “bass-strum” style (Hamburger, 2001, p. 31 and Schmid 1994, p. 33) practitioners also use terminology such as “ballad strum” (Johnson 2004, p. 44) or “root-chord” strum (Buckingham 1997, p. 13).}
Figure 2.3  Typical 1920s country diatonic or walking bass runs used to connect chords when playing in a bass-strum accompaniment style.

These typical modifications of the traditional bass-strum comping style discussed above can be heard on numerous early country recordings, including Dalhart’s 1924 million-selling recording, ‘Wreck of the Old 97’ (guitar played by Frank Ferera). Another early country recording artist, Riley Puckett can be heard playing in a bass-strum style on his recordings, including the song ‘Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane’ (Columbia 107-D 1924) which features diatonic walking bass runs added between simple chord changes. Puckett’s later recordings with the influential group The Skillet Lickers also demonstrate him playing in this same style. Similarly, the two sides recorded by Jimmie Rodgers at the Bristol sessions in 1927 feature him using this approach (‘Sleep, Baby, Sleep’ and ‘The Soldier’s Sweetheart’ Victor 20864, 1927).

This traditional bass-strum approach was certainly a part of Maybelle’s musical vernacular and will be more closely examined later in this chapter, however the innovation in her playing occurred through the transformation of the bass-strum style into her integrated thumb-lead style. Rather than simply playing bass lines, Carter integrated melodic material with her thumb whilst continuing to strum chords with her fingers, effectively combining both rhythm and lead guitar functions. In addition to demonstrating great technical ability, this innovation allowed Maybelle to feature the guitar as a lead instrument in the Carter Family songs. As one of the earliest guitarists in country music to incorporate lead breaks, on what became some of the most commercially successful records of the time, Carter undoubtedly affected the soundscape of the early American pop music industry with her innovative playing style.
2.2 Overview of Carter’s Functional Approaches and Physical Playing Style

An analysis of 285 Carter Family songs undertaken for this study uncovers certain trends in Maybelle’s approach to playing. An overview of Carter’s functional approaches will be offered in this section, along with a consideration of some of the physical aspects of her playing, in order to establish a framework for the subsequent close analysis of each approach later in the chapter.

The work of country music scholars Bill Evans (1998) and Gordon Ross (2003) provides a list of stylistic norms characteristic of early country, including the use of simple diatonic harmonies and instrumental breaks between sung verses, with guitarists usually playing open chords in first position and using bass-strum comping patterns in the right hand, often with alternating bass notes added, in order to embellish simple chord progressions;
While Carter conforms to many of these anticipated norms when functioning as a rhythm guitarist, immediately noticeable on examination of the Carter Family catalogue is Maybelle’s innovative use of the guitar as a lead instrument. Although the guitar had been integral within the sound of early country during the 1920s, as can be seen in the list of anticipated norms the instrument primarily functioned in the role of accompaniment or rhythm guitar.
As seen in figure 2.5, Carter played lead guitar on 280 of 285 (98%) Carter Family songs analysed. On the five songs that feature Carter playing rhythm only, she played in a bass-strum comping style throughout. While the vast majority of songs feature Maybelle as a lead
soloist, her typical approach to the functional use of the guitar within Carter Family arrangements was to comp during a song’s verse/chorus section (in a bass-strum style) and play lead during breaks. This approach can be heard on 255 of 280 (91%) songs. However on 25 (9%) songs, Carter uses what can be considered a continuous lead approach throughout, shadowing the vocal line during sung sections, in addition to playing featured solo breaks.24

Carter demonstrates four distinct approaches to playing lead, with the majority of breaks played in her integrated thumb-lead style (approximately 220/280 or 79%). However, as can be seen in figure 2.5, Carter also incorporates slide (14/280 or 5%), fingerstyle (7/280 or 2%) and flatpick (approximately 39/280 or 14%) techniques. With these four lead approaches, Carter was able to establish a variety of roles for the guitar within the Carter Family catalogue.

Further, Maybelle’s use of multiple approaches was evident from the first Carter Family recording session, shown in figure 2.6;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhythm guitar throughout</th>
<th>Rhythm guitar during verse/chorus, lead during breaks</th>
<th>Continuous lead throughout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• ‘Poor Orphan Child’ (BVE 39752-2)</td>
<td>• ‘Bury Me Under The Willow’ (BVE 39750-2)</td>
<td>• ‘Single Girl, Married Girl’ (BVE 39754-2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ‘The Wandering Boy’ (BVE 39755-1)</td>
<td>• ‘Little Log Cabin by the Sea’ (BVE 39751-2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ‘Storms are on the Ocean’ (BVE 39753-2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.6 Carter’s multiple functional approaches on Carter Family recordings from the 1927 Bristol sessions.

As noted, when playing in her integrated thumb-lead style, Maybelle used her right-hand thumb to play lead lines on the bass strings during guitar breaks, whilst using her finger(s) to strum chords on the treble strings. Figure 2.7 shows a transcription of the first four bars of the opening guitar break to ‘Wildwood Flower’ (BVE 45029-1), a song recorded by the Carter Family in 1928. Amongst the fingerstyle guitar community this song had become a standard,

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24 Maybelle plays continuous lead on all slide songs (14), all fingerstyle songs (7) and continuous thumb-lead on four songs.
and is considered a “rite of passage for country guitarists” (Sokolow 1999, p. 32), with Chet Atkins describing it as the “national anthem” (Oermann 1996, p. 26) of country music;

![Figure 2.7 ‘Wildwood Flower’ (BVE 45029-1, 1928. Track time 0:00-0:06). Opening guitar break, bars 1-4, with right hand annotations.]

As seen in figure 2.7, Carter plays the melodic line with her thumb (annotated with squares), while her finger(s) plays interspersed accompanimental strums. On beat 2 of bars 1 and 2, Carter down-strums the chord with her finger, and then up-strums with the same finger on the second half of beat 2. On the up-strum, a three note voicing of the chord is played. On beats 3 and 4 of those same bars, Carter plays a melodic note with the thumb, and then plays only a single note with an up-strum of her finger on the weak beat, still functioning as accompaniment. This variable chord voicing (between 1-4 strings) was standard for Carter, and rather than a conscious choice, was more likely due to the physicality of the right hand finger up-strum, adding an effective element of adaptable texture.

Carter stated that she initially played “with my bare fingers [and] didn't have a pick or nothing” (Carter 1963) but by all accounts, she later played with a thumb and fingerpicks. Seeger recalls that Carter played with a plastic thumb pick and metal fingerpicks (2000, p. 5)
and this can be validated thorough analysis of performance videos\textsuperscript{25}. When visually examining Carter’s playing style, due to camera angle or quality, it is difficult to ascertain whether Carter played only with her $i$ finger or both $i$ and $m$ fingers when strumming chords. Maybelle’s granddaughter, Carlene (a guitar player herself) states that Carter’s “middle finger was constantly strumming” (Sokolow 1999, p.10), however Johnny Cash (also a guitar player) states that Maybelle played with “a thumb pick and two steel finger picks” (The Original Carter Family 1999, p. 13), implying that she used two fingers to strum. It seems most likely that Carter strummed primarily with her index finger, with her middle finger often moving sympathetically or at times joining forces with her index\textsuperscript{26}.

When comping in a bass-strum style, similarly, Carter played bass notes with her thumb, and strummed chords with her finger(s), demonstrated during the verse sections of ‘Wildwood Flower’;

![Figure 2.8 ‘Wildwood Flower’ (BVE 45029-1, 1928. Track time 0:21-0:26). Verse 1, bars 1-4, with right hand annotations.](image)

\textsuperscript{25} Carter can be seen playing with a plastic thumb pick and metal fingerpick in the following video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOxocFAHIPU (Accessed 28 April 2017).

\textsuperscript{26} In the on-going analysis and transcriptions, this right hand protocol will be the assumption. See this video for a visual example https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XE880Ed59aCY (Accessed 28 April 2017).
Figure 2.8 shows the opening bars of the first verse, with Carter playing bass notes with her thumb and strumming chords with her fingers, constantly alternating down/up strokes in line with a respective strong/weak-beat maxim.

Video footage of Carter playing in her integrated thumb-lead style shows her to play with a relatively straight wrist, with a slight drop of the ball of her hand\(^{27}\), facilitating an explosive finger movement when ‘scratching’ chords on the treble strings.

Figure 2.9    Maybelle Carter (Carter Family, 2000).

Carter used a variable radius in her right hand when strumming, playing wider strokes when accenting certain beats within a rhythm pattern. Seeger also identified nuances in

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\(^{27}\) Later videos of Maybelle Carter playing with the Carter Sister’s show her playing more of a standard rhythm style, playing down and up strum patterns with the flatpick, not the bass-strum technique, for comping. At this point the group were often playing with a full band, with Chet Atkins playing lead, so presumably it was not necessary for Maybelle to use her self-sufficient, integrated thumb-lead style. During these videos, noticeably Carter plays with more of a ‘twisted wrist’ style. A video of the Carter Sisters and Mother Maybelle comping for Atkins can be seen here [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3w_NwPevSas](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3w_NwPevSas) (Accessed 28 April 2017).
Carter’s right hand approach, stating that her “downward finger strokes tend to be stronger than the upward strokes” (2000, p. 5)\(^{28}\).

Carter played with a relatively economical and efficient left hand, demonstrating little extraneous vertical movement of the fingers\(^{29}\). She played almost exclusively in first position, using open chords and very little use of barre chords. Carter demonstrated a high level of left hand dexterity, with much of her approach requiring her to play moving bass notes or melodic lines whilst holding partial chord voicings, which she navigated with ease and fluidity.

According to Maybelle Carter (1963), she played a Stella acoustic guitar (likely a parlour sized instrument) on her first two recording session. In 1929, she purchased an archtop Gibson L5, which was her primary instrument for the remainder of her career\(^{30}\). The bass response of the archtop likely suited, and possible enhanced, Maybelle’s playing approach, in which most lead lines were played on the bass strings. With the use of metal finger-picks, Maybelle’s overall tone is bright, but she can frequently be seen modifying her right hand playing position in relation to the soundhole, incorporating the variety of timbres associated with the practice of playing closer to the bridge, or over the fretboard on an acoustic instrument.

Having established the fundamentals of Carter’s approach and physical playing style, this chapter will now incorporate a close analysis of Carter as a rhythm and lead player, focusing on the specifics of her musical approach.

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\(^{28}\) This was likely a result of the natural mechanics of right hand strumming, in that down-strums typically tend to be more weighted, and one often strikes more strings on a down-strum (bass and treble strings) than during an up-strum (mostly treble). This basic principal has likely to do with the rotation of the right hand when strumming with a loose wrist.

\(^{29}\) The following video shows the concision of Carter’s left hand; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8szdi1D7OE&list=RD15eWqeR5WCY&index=3 (Accessed 28 April 2017).

2.3  Carter as a Rhythm Player

When functioning as a rhythm player, as previously discussed, Carter typically employed a stratified bass-strum style, often alternating bass notes during static chord passages, and adding walking bass lines to connect chord root notes during harmonic changes. Maybelle takes this approach during the verses of ‘Wildwood Flower’, seen in figure 2.10;
As seen in the transcription in figure 2.10, Maybelle comps in a bass-strum style during the verses of ‘Wildwood Flower’, incorporating ascending diatonic walking bass-lines (WB) to connect chord root notes during dominant-tonic harmonic changes, and alternating basses (AB) between the root and 3rd of the chord in static I chord passages. In other Carter Family songs, Maybelle incorporates more florid bass-lines, such as those heard in ‘Keep On The Sunnyside’ (BVE 45022-1, 1928). Figure 2.11 shows an annotation of Carter’s bass lines during the first verse of ‘Keep On The Sunnyside’;
There's a dark and a troubled side of life.

There's a bright and a sunny side, too.

Though we
As seen in figure 2.11, during the first verse of ‘Keep On The Sunnyside’, Carter connects root notes of the tonic and dominant chord with ascending walking bass lines in bars 10-11, and 14 -15, and connects the I-V7 in bars 6-7 with a descending walking-bass line. She adds alternating bass notes during static chord passages, playing the 3rd and 5th above, or below the root.

These gestures add interest to the bass layer of Carter Family songs, with Maybelle playing the part of both guitarist and bass player in the ensemble. Additionally, this approach was sonically effective within the context of the instrumentation of the Carter Family. In the
song ‘Wildwood Flower’, ‘Keep on the Sunnyside’ and many others, Sara plays autoharp while Maybelle plays the guitar, and these instruments share much of the same pitch range and tonal quality. The use of both guitar and autoharp in the harmonic filler layer create a heavy treble register presence, but through the incorporation of independent bass lines, Maybelle adds a contrasting bass layer, juxtaposing independent low-end movement against the treble chords of the guitar and autoharp.

### Rhythm Cells

Upon closer analysis of Maybelle Carter’s rhythm parts, it is clear that her approach was standardised, with the consistent use of a number of repetitive rhythm cells. Seeger (2000, p. 11) identifies four recurrent cells;

![Figure 2.12](image)

Figure 2.12 Carter’s four recurrent rhythm cells in duple meter, according to Seeger (2000).

Drawing upon Seeger’s perspective (2000), analysis for this study identifies five two-beat cells consistently used by Carter;

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31 Guitar range = E2-B6, Autoharp = F2- C6.
32 For further information on the function of textural layers in popular music, see Moore (2012), pp. 19-28.
These five cells, in multiple combinations, are the basis of almost all of Carter’s accompaniments when functioning as rhythm guitarist. An analysis of the opening verse of ‘Bury Me Under The Weeping Willow’ (BVE 39750-2, 1927), the first song recorded by the Carter Family at the Bristol sessions in 1927, demonstrates Maybelle’s modular use of these cells;
Figure 2.14  The Carter Family ‘Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow’ (BVE 39750-2, 1927. Track time 0:00-0:21). Verse 1 with annotation of continual cell variation in duple meter.
As seen in figure 2.14, Carter constructs her comping pattern primarily from B, D and E cells, with some use of A and C cells at the start of the verse. Additionally, she adds walking bass lines in bar 8 and 14, connecting the root of the dominant and tonic chords.

While a large majority of Carter Family songs are played in duple meter (213 of the 285 songs analysed for the corpus study in this chapter were in duple meter), Maybelle relied on the same modular approach of recurrent rhythm cell usage, modified to function in triple meter when necessary. Figure 2.15 shows four identifiable patterns used by Maybelle to construct her accompaniments in triple meter;

![Figure 2.15](image)

Carter's four recurrent rhythm cells in triple meter.

The transcription shown in figure 2.16 shows an annotation of Carter’s recurrent triple meter rhythm cells in the song ‘Little Moses’ (BVE 49860-2) recorded by the Carter Family in 1929;
Figure 2.16  The Carter Family 'Little Moses' (BVE 49860-2, 1929. Track time 0:00-0:17). Verse 1 with annotation of continual cell variation in triple meter.
As seen in figure 2.16, Carter primarily used the A and C cells in her triple meter accompaniment for ‘Little Moses’, reverting to walking bass-lines during V-I chord changes in the first, second and fourth phrases of the verse (bars 2, 6 and 14).

In conclusion, while it seems that Carter’s use of these rhythm cells was fundamentally reactive as opposed to rigorously composed, she demonstrates a reliance on these cells for rhythm part construction throughout the Carter Family catalogue.

**2.4 Carter as a Lead Player**

While Carter’s approach to playing rhythm was similar to that of the established country guitar tradition of the late 1920s, yet stylised through the modular use of repetitive rhythm cells, her true innovation becomes apparent when assessing her technical and musical approaches to playing lead, in particular her integrated thumb-lead style. A transcription of the first guitar break from the 1927 song ‘Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow’ demonstrates Carter’s application of her then unique integrated thumb-lead style;
'Bury Me Under The Weeping Willow’ begins with two cycles of a verse and chorus, and at 1:12 Maybelle plays the first of two 16-bar guitar breaks, integrating a single-line melodic lead on strings 6-3 (annotated with squares in figure 2.17) played with her thumb, whilst continuing to strum chords on the treble strings.
On the downbeat of bar 1, Carter plays a G melody note on the third string, then strums a two tone chord on beat 2 (C and E on strings 2 and 1 respectively), which function as accompaniment. Although the accompaniment can be considered sparse at this point, the harmonic layer remains adequate, especially with the addition of Sara’s autoharp accompaniment. As the melody moves to the bass strings in bars 2-9, Carter re-incorporates three string chords on the trebles, with some partial chord voicings and single notes occurring at times when strumming with an i finger upstroke (bars 4 and 12). What is clear from an aural perspective, is the melody-driven nature of this approach, as the line played by the thumb takes priority while the chords are subsequently integrated at logical points, filling gaps in the melodic phrase. In addition to demonstrating an innovative musical use of the guitar, this approach highlights Carter’s substantial technical abilities; simultaneously playing legato lead melodies with her right hand thumb whilst maintaining a seamless, nuanced rhythm pattern with her fingers.

**Keys and Playing Positions**

Carter’s ability to effectively combine lead and rhythm through her integrated-thumb lead style was facilitated by the consistent use of open chords in first position and aided by the simple harmonic profile of Carter Family songs. Only three of the 285 songs analysed for this study feature chords other than I, IV and V, and 100% were in major keys\(^{33}\). While the Carter Family recorded songs that ‘sounded’ in almost all major keys, Maybelle only physically played in three ‘key positions’ when using her integrated-lead approach; C, F and G major. The wide variety of sounding keys heard across the Carter Family catalogue was produced by Carter either drop-tuning her guitar or by using a capo\(^{34}\).

\(^{33}\) Rockwell’s (2011) analysis of the harmonic profile of 290 Carter Family songs also identifies only three songs featuring chords other than I, IV and V.

John Miller, a practitioner of the Carter Style notes:

The driving force behind key selection was unquestionably whatever key worked best for Sara's singing. That having been determined, the next step was to match up her singing key with Maybelle's comfort zone for preferred playing positions, and then, if possible, avoid re-tuning. Tuning a half-step low to sound in B when playing out of the C position, her favourite playing position, makes perfect sense, but tuning a half-step low to sound in E while playing in an F position, as on “Single Girl, Married Girl” is perhaps less obvious, though Maybelle was to prove to be very adroit with and comfortable in F position (Miller 2012).
As identified by Miller, Sokolow also notes that Carter “favored the key of C, and she often used a capo or tuned her guitar several frets lower than usual in order to play in different keys while using the C chords and licks” (1999, p. 10). Seeger also maintains “Maybelle played mostly in C shape” (2000, p. 4).

Figure 2.19 demonstrates the relationship between the open I, IV and V7 chord shapes in first position used consistently by Carter (shaded notes), and the adjacent diatonic C major scale pattern (un-shaded and shaded notes);

![C Major (I) F Major (IV) G7 (V7)](image)

As seen in figure 2.19, the embedded open primary chord shapes within/adjacent to the C major scale pattern in first position allowed Carter to fret diatonic melodic lead lines, whilst simultaneously holding full or partial chords. The idiomatic proximity of harmonic and melodic material facilitated Carter’s ability to play chords and melody at the same time, the essence of her integrated thumb-lead style.

When returning to an annotated transcription of the lead break from ‘Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow’, the efficiency and effectiveness of the Carter’s chord-melody integration approach can be seen;
As seen in figure 2.20, within a one or two-fret reach of any chord tone, or by merely lifting a finger from a chord tone to play an open string, Carter was able to access all diatonic
scale degrees where necessary for her lead line. While C major was Carter's favoured key when playing in her integrated thumb-lead style, songs played in F and G ‘key positions’ were not uncommon. The incorporation of these particular keys was likely due to the fact that her integrated thumb-lead approach was also easily applicable in those keys. Figure 2.21 shows the relationship between open I, IV and V7 chord shapes in F major, and the adjacent major scale pattern in first position;

![Chord Diagram](image)

Figure 2.21 Carter’s chord-melody integration in F Major.

A transcription of Carter’s guitar break for the song ‘Single Girl, Married Girl’ (BVE 39754-2, 1927) played in F position is shown in figure 2.22, again with the lead line annotated. Similar to the guitar break from ‘Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow’, this break demonstrates the seamless integration of chords and melody, but now in the key of F major;
Figure 2.22  ‘Single Girl, Married Girl’ (BVE 39754-2, 1927. Track time 0:00-0:23). Opening guitar break with annotation of chord-melody integration in F Major.

Figure 2.23 demonstrates the relationship between the open I, IV and V7 chord shapes in first position in G major, and adjacent major scale material;

![Chord Shapes Diagram]

Figure 2.23  Carter’s chord-melody integration in G Major.

Figure 2.24 shows a transcription of the guitar break from the Carter Family song ‘I Ain’t Going To Work Tomorrow’ (BVE 45025-1, 1928) played in G position, exemplifying the application of Maybelle’s integrated thumb-lead style in the key of G. Again, Carter simultaneously plays lead lines on strings 6-3, whilst playing chords on strings 3-1, accessing the adjacent scale material within proximity of her chosen I, IV and V7 chord shapes;
The systematic approach to playing lead seen through this brief analysis of Carter Family songs in the keys of C, F and G demonstrates one of the unique and identifying facets, or idiotechniques, of Maybelle Carter’s playing. The approach identified here serves as blueprint for almost all of Maybelle’s lead breaks when playing in her integrated thumb-lead style. While her innovation was certainly effective, this analysis also highlights the idiomatic nature of the integrated-lead approach, governed by the physical possibilities of the left hand.
Legato

As demonstrated in the previous transcriptions, Carter frequently employed hammer-ons and pull-offs in her lead lines. As seen in the transcription of the lead break in ‘Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow’ (figure 2.20), Maybelle begins her guitar break with a ^2-^3 hammer-on, played on the fourth string, which functions as a pick-up into the first phrase of the break. Carter uses this same gesture in bar 6 and 8, where, as in the anacrusis, the gesture signals the start of a new phrase. While the choice of notes to embellish with hammer-ons can here be considered functional signalling (highlighting important phrase points), it is also highly idiomatic. Carter is embellishing the melody using open string to fretted note hammer-on figures, creating a nuanced sonic effect and enhancing the aesthetic quality of the line. Maybelle often uses similar slurs to embellish her lead lines, most frequently using diatonic scale degree slurs involving the open 4th and 3rd string;

![Figure 2.25 Carter's common slur combinations.](image)

Carter sometimes incorporates quick slurs, as in the opening bar of the ‘Single Girl, Married Girl’ guitar break (see figure 2.22), with the gesture functioning as a grace note. At other times she employs slower slurs, as in the ‘Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow’ break, bars 6 and 8 (figure 2.20), where the note functions as an integral part of the melodic line, articulating a particular note pair in a legato fashion. Although relatively simple in nature, these gestures add musical nuance, and also facilitate increased speed.
Melodic Imitation and Shadowing

According to Zwonitzer, an integral aspect of the Carter Family’s arrangement approach was the belief that “every song should have a distinctive instrumental introduction, so that the audience could recognize it from the first chords” (2002, p. 122), and many Carter family songs follow this tenet. In order to create distinctive and recognisable lead breaks, Maybelle’s main approach to constructing lead lines was based on a principle of melodic imitation. Rather than playing autonomous, newly composed lead breaks, Carter would imitate the vocal line of a verse or chorus of a given song during her guitar break, in an approach that can be defined as an imitative-lead style. This approach created a high level of melodic and motivic unity within individual Carter Family songs, unifying the group’s sound across their catalogue, and can be considered another of Maybelle Carter’s idiotechniques.

The Carter Family song ‘Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow’ typifies Maybelle’s imitative-lead approach. The song features two identical guitar breaks, which occur after the song’s second and third chorus, and both the chorus and verse sections of the song feature the same melodic and harmonic profile. As seen previously in a transcription of the first verse of ‘Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow’ (figure 2.14), Sara Carter’s vocal line is diatonic and often outlines the underlying harmonies of the bar. During Maybelle’s guitar break (figure 2.20), her lead line imitates the vocal melody heard during the first verse (which is almost identical during each subsequent verse and chorus). Figure 2.26 shows a transcription of the vocal melody from verse one, and the guitar lead from the Maybelle’s first guitar break, with the chords removed for clarity;
Figure 2.26  The Carter Family ‘Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow’ (BVE 39750-2, 1927). Verse 1 vocal line (0:00-0:21) and guitar break 1 lead line (1:12-1:28). Melodic comparison, with annotation of melodic deviations and chords removed for clarity (original key: B major).

The transcription in figure 2.26 shows the similarity between the vocal and guitar melodic line, with Carter’s lead closely imitating the sung melody. However, the annotations identify some deviation from strict imitation, including instances of pitch addition and omission, as well as rhythmic displacement. In a number of bars, Carter augments the melodic line through the addition of pitches (+), which often function as passing or neighbour tones. Pitch additions in the guitar break typically occur in relation to the sung verse at points where the vocal line features a sustained note (minim or longer). This can be seen in figure 2.26, bar 7, where Sara sings a semibreve, drawing out the end of the first phrase over the dominant chord. In order to compensate for the lack of sustain inherent to the acoustic guitar, Maybelle augments her line in this bar, adding a minim to ‘fill’ the space of Sara’s equivalent held semibreve. Maybelle similarly augments the melody in bars 1 and 2, adding crotchets in place of the minims present in the vocal line. Again, these additions can be perceived as a result of
Maybelle negotiating the acoustic guitar’s inherent lack of sustain. Further, the addition of notes to the break within the first phrase, allows the guitar to present a slightly more florid statement of the melody than that heard during the vocal statement. Although inherently imitating the vocal line, this affords the guitar some autonomy.

Bars 4, 12 and 13 demonstrate instances of pitch omission (\), places in which Maybelle eliminates a note from the guitar lead line in relation to the vocal line. These instances typically occur at times where the vocal melody repeats a pitch. The elimination of the repeated note in the guitar line again allows for subtle contrast, yet does not overtly disrupt the sense of imitation. Bars 3, 6 and 8, show instances of rhythmic displacement (\^\), where Carter modifies the rhythmic placement of a melodic note in relation to the vocal line. In bar 3, Sara sings on beat 1 and 4, with the guitar anticipating the entrance of the second note in relation to the vocal melody by one beat. Here, again Maybelle is likely driven by the issue of sustain. In bar 8, the guitar displaces a melodic note in relation to the vocal melody, delaying the entrance by one beat. This displacement allows for an instance of pitch addition in Maybelle’s part, adding a hammered quaver pair on beat 3, which functions as a pick-up into the displaced melody note on beat 4. Here, Carter employs her recurrent open to stopped string slur gesture, subtly adding articulative interest to the line.

After the first guitar break in ‘Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow’, the song continues with another verse and chorus and then features a second guitar break (track time 2:02-2:19). The lead line in the second break is played almost identically to that of the first, and Maybelle’s ability to accurately replicate her first guitar break demonstrates skill on her part, and also highlights the fact that her lead approach was not improvised, but a well-rehearsed and conceptualized composition. Maybelle’s ability to play repeated breaks with great accuracy is notable throughout the Carter Family’s catalogue - especially noteworthy considering that most early Carter Family songs were recorded in one or two takes (Wolfe 2000).

A fourth class of melodic deviation frequently seen in Carter’s imitative-lead style breaks
is that of pitch alteration (\(\infty\)), where Maybelle alters the pitch of a note within a phrase but maintains its rhythmic placement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Melodic Deviation</th>
<th>Symbol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Pitch omission (omitting pitches in relation to the vocal melody)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Pitch addition (adding pitches in relation to the vocal melody)</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Pitch alteration (altering pitches, but maintaining rhythmic placement in relation to the vocal melody)</td>
<td>(\infty)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Rhythmic displacement (maintaining pitch, but changing rhythmic placement in relation to the vocal melody, via anticipation or delay)</td>
<td>(\uparrow) (\downarrow)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.27  Carter’s four classes of melodic deviation when functioning in imitative-lead style.

The song ‘Wildwood Flower’ is another prime example of Carter’s imitative-lead approach, demonstrating her use of melodic deviation in the form of pitch alteration, as well as addition and omission, and rhythmic displacement.

As discussed previously, Carter plays in a bass-strum accompaniment style during the verse sections of ‘Wildwood Flower’ (see figure 2.10) but switches to her imitative-lead style for the breaks (see figure 2.34). Figure 2.28 shows a transcription of the vocal melody from verse one of ‘Wildwood Flower’ and the lead line from the Maybelle’s opening guitar break (with chords removed for clarity), showing the close imitation between the verse’s vocal melody and guitar break lead line, with annotated instances of melodic deviations, as well as rhythmic displacement;
The Carter Family 'Wildwood Flower' (BVE 45029-1, 1928) Verse 1 vocal line (0:22-0:42) and opening guitar break lead line (0:00-0:21). Melodic comparison with annotations of melodic deviations and chords removed for clarity (original key: Bb major).
Bars 10 and 12 demonstrate instances of pitch alteration, with Carter altering a pitch in relation to the vocal line yet maintaining the rhythmic placement of the note within the phrase. Also apparent are some other significant deviations; instances of pitch omission occur in bars 3, 11, 12, 15 and 17. Here, Carter omits pitches in relation to the vocal line, scratching accompaniment chords at those moments on the treble strings. Bars 8, 11, 13, 15 and 16 feature rhythmic displacements, with each instance demonstrating a pitch being delayed in relation to the vocal line. While on the micro level there are a number of deviations from strict imitation of the vocal line during her guitar breaks, Carter’s subtle and consistent use of these devices within the context of a mainly imitative melodic line are effective, creating a high level of motivic unity, with moments of instrumental autonomy.

Although ‘Wildwood Flower” has here been used to expose Maybelle Carter's imitative-lead approach and her consistent nuances, another important aspect is the agency of Carter herself on this record. One of 13 songs recorded in 1928 at the Carter Family’s second recording session for Ralph Peer and Victor Records in Camden, New Jersey, ‘Wildwood Flower’ is arranged to feature five guitar breaks, alternating with four sung verses, placing Maybelle in a dominant position on the track.

The frequency of guitar breaks on this and many Carter Family songs highlights the integral nature of the guitar, and Maybelle’s then unique approach to playing lead, “draw[ing] attention to the instrumentalist as the central ‘voice’ in the text” (Ramsey 2004, p. 50) showcasing and even prioritizing Maybelle’s lead guitar work. All but one of the songs recorded at the 1928 Camden sessions feature at least one lead break. This is in comparison to their debut recording session the year before in Bristol, in which only four of the six songs recorded feature Maybelle playing lead. At their 1928 Camden session, 12 of 13 total songs recorded over a two-day residency feature Maybelle playing lead, often with numerous solo breaks featured on each track. This frequency supports a speculative argument that both the Carter Family and Ralph Peer intended to record songs which showcased Maybelle’s skills,
and certainly, as in ‘Wildwood Flower’, prepared and chose arrangements of songs that began with a lead guitar break in order to introduce the song’s main melodic material via the instrument, again placing the lead guitar in a position of dominance within the group. While it can only be speculation as to the intent of the Carter Family in relation to prioritising the lead guitar, Carter's imitative approach to playing lead is undoubtedly effective at unifying her presence and ‘voice’ throughout the song.

Perhaps demonstrating an increasing awareness of the unique skill and agency of Maybelle, the Carter Family seemingly utilised her skills to the fullest extent during their 1928 Camden session recordings, and as noted, feature her playing imitative-lead breaks on all but one song. Here, a brief consideration of that song, ‘Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone’ (BVE 45026-1, 1928), may be worthwhile. One reason the Carters omitted a lead break from this recording may have been due to logistical issues. With a duration of 3:16 minutes, close to the maximum that could fit on a commercial disc during the late 1920s, the Carter Family could have felt the lyrical content of the song was too integral to be modified in order to make room for a guitar break.\(^35\) However, another answer might be found through a brief consideration of the song lyrics themselves;

> When death shall close these eyelids,  
> and this heart shall cease to be,  
> and they lay me down to rest,  
> in some flowery, boundary tree.  
>  
> Will you miss me,  
> will you miss me,  
> will you miss me,  
> will you miss me when I'm gone?  
>  
> Perhaps you'll plant a flower,  
> on my poor unworthy grave?  
> Come and sit alone beside me,  
> when the roses nod and wave?

\(^35\) In most cases discs used by record companies were able to hold only between three to four minutes of music. See Wald (2004), p. 57.
Will you miss me,
will you miss me,
will you miss me,
will you miss me when I'm gone?

One sweet thought my soul shall cherish.
when this fleeting life has flown.
This thought will cheer when dyin',
will you miss me when I'm gone?

Will you miss me,
will you miss me,
will you miss me,
will you miss me when I'm gone?

When these lips shall never more,
press a kiss upon thy brow.
When I'm cold and still in my death,
will you love me then as now?

Figure 2.29  The Carter Family, ‘Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone?’ (BVE 45026-1, 1928). Lyrics.

As can be interpreted through a reading of the songs lyrics (shown in figure 2.29) ‘Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone?’ is a plaintive lament in which the protagonist questions whether she matters, does she have worth, will she be missed when she is gone? The poignancy of the song is matched through the Carter Family’s arrangement, which features a slow tempo, a simple bass-strum accompaniment throughout, with A.P.’s deep, haunting voice ‘bassing-in’ to re-iterate the pleading question “Will you miss me?” during the chorus. Perhaps the Carters felt it musically inappropriate to add a driving guitar break during this introspective song, or perhaps they felt a guitar break featuring Maybelle’s exceptional style, filled with energy from the character and drive infused within her playing, would not compliment the solemn nature of the song. Reading more deeply into their arrangement choices could perhaps uncover a more ironic reason for the lack of a guitar break on this song, entitled ‘Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone?’ Who is the Carter Family without Maybelle Carter? What is this song in comparison to those tracks that feature the electricity of Maybelle’s lead guitar contributions? What would the Carter Family songs be without the innovative, technically
skilled young guitarist who had turned just 19 years old on the day that the song was recorded? For a group of musicians who demonstrated exceptional arranging abilities, and featured the lead-guitar as a main voice within the text on all of the other songs recorded in Camden in 1928, the limited role of Maybelle during this song was surely a reasoned one. What that exact reasoning was may never be known, but she is certainly missed on the track.

Continuous Lead Approach

As shown thus far, Carter’s use of her imitative-lead approach during guitar breaks served a number of purposes within the context of Carter Family songs. In addition to showcasing Maybelle’s innovative approach to playing and her exceptional guitar skills, the nature of her lead break construction, based upon the principle of melodic imitation, created a high level of motivic unity within Carter Family songs, and a consistent ‘sound’ across the groups catalogue. Intentional or not, each of these factors likely influenced the popularity and subsequent commercial success of the group during the late 1920s. As shown in figure 2.5, a third approach to the functional role of the guitar employed by Carter (in addition to playing in a continuous bass-strum comping style throughout, or comping during verse and chorus sections with independent lead breaks) was that of playing continuous lead throughout a song, melodically shadowing the lead vocal during verse and chorus sections, in addition to playing independent lead breaks. This third functional role effectively showcases the lead guitar as a primary voice throughout an entire song, further centralising the role of the guitar within the Carter Family sound, and was used by Maybelle on 25 of the 280 Carter Family songs that feature a guitar break.

The song ‘John Hardy was a Desperate Little Man’ (BVE 45024-2, 1928) well exemplifies Maybelle Carter’s continuous lead approach. As with ‘Wildwood Flower’ (which was recorded at the same session in Camden in 1928), ‘John Hardy was a Desperate Little Man’ features Maybelle as the only instrumentalist on the track. The song begins with a lead
break in her integrated thumb-lead style, with Carter again employing an imitative-lead approach to break construction, imitating the subsequent sung melody. The song is in strophic/verse form, with a consistent harmonic and melodic structure throughout. Played in the key of C (with Maybelle tuned down 1 fret), the song deceptively begins on the subdominant chord. As seen in figure 2.30, the guitar’s lead melody incorporates a Bb upper-neighbour in bars 2, 6 and 11, leading to further ambiguity of the primary tonal centre;
As Sara begins to sing during the first verse (track time 0:17), Maybelle continues to play the lead line underneath Sara’s vocals, with Maybelle’s guitar continuously shadowing Sara. Figure 2.31 shows a complete transcription of the first verse of the song, demonstrating the inherent similarity of the guitar lead and vocal line, but also annotated to show instances of melodic deviation;
Figure 2.31  The Carter Family 'John Hardy was a Desperate Little Man' (BVE 45024-2, 1928. Track time 0:00-0:32). Verse 1 with annotation of melodic deviations.
Carter’s guitar lead remains mainly true to the melodic profile of the vocal line with the main instances of deviation occurring in the form of pitch omission (bar 1, 3, 4, 5, 11, 12 and 14), in order to accommodate the integration of accompanimental chords, as do the rhythmic disruptions, in the form of delays, in bars 1 and 9. Pitch additions occur in bars 4, 5, 8 and 13, all points where the vocal line features a held note, with Maybelle adding a pitch in order to compensate for issues of instrumental sustain.

Here, brief attention should also be paid to the structure of the arrangement of ‘John Hardy was a Desperate Little Man’. Rather than play a full guitar break after the first vocal verse, this song deviates from that which can be considered Maybelle and the Carter Family’s normative arrangement strategy, which was to alternate sung verse/chorus sections with full guitar breaks36. In ‘John Hardy was a Desperate Little Man’, Maybelle plays a shortened 4-bar break, repeating melodic material from the verse and creating an echo effect with her abbreviated solo;

---

36 Here, ‘full’ implies an equally weighted guitar break in relation to the bar count of the song’s verse or chorus sections. Of the 280 Carter Family songs that feature guitar breaks, only 12 feature abbreviated breaks, 4 – 8 bars in length.
F  

John | Hardy he was a | des-perate little man he

F  

5 carried two guns every day. He shot a

C  

man on the West Vir-gin-is line, and you oughta seen John

C  

78
As seen in figure 2.32, the abbreviated break occurs in bars 16-19 (blue) with Carter restating the material of bars 13-15 (red) to form the short break. Here, Maybelle disrupts the established four bar hypermeter of the verse in the third phrase, eliding into a repetition of the phrase in bar 16, creating an instance of hypermetric displacement dissonance (Biamonte 2014). Again, the likely impetus for this modified approach to break construction was an effort to navigate the narrative of the song in relation to the time limitations imposed by the recording process. ‘John Hardy was a Desperate Little Man’ was an adapted 19th century ballad, with seven verses telling the story of a coal miner who killed a fellow worker during a game of dice (Lomax, 1960). With a running time of almost three minutes, it was likely that the Carter Family did not have room to include full alternating guitar breaks on the song without cutting integral lyrical material, therefore compromising the narrative. Crafting an abbreviated break from pre-existing melodic material allowed the solo lead guitar to feature...
between every verse, whilst maintaining the song’s narrative. This approach demonstrates Carter’s musical versatility, able to modify her contribution when necessary, in order to best serve the needs of a song, whilst maintaining the presence of some form of independent lead guitar break.

From this analysis, further questions arise about musical hierarchy within the context of the Carter Family group. Who is the lead ‘voice’ on this song? The song begins and ends with a lead guitar break, features a modified solo guitar break at the end of each verse, and during each verse the lead ‘voice’ duties are shared equally between Sara, the lead singer, and Maybelle’s guitar, which shadows the lead vocal line continuously. According to Middleton, popular music can be overwhelmingly considered a “voice music” (1990, p. 261), and he asserts that “vocals act as a unifying focus within the song” (ibid., p. 264). Arguably the singer of a group is the most recognizable member, and the narrative conveyed through their lyrics often dominates a listener’s attention. However, Maybelle’s lead line shares this spotlight with Sara’s vocals on ‘John Hardy was a Desperate Little Man’, as well as the 24 other songs which she plays in a continuous-lead approach, assuming a prevailing position on the track, unifying the musical narrative and dominating the soundscape.

In addition to raising questions regarding Maybelle Carter’s agency and position within the Carter Family, ‘John Hardy was a Desperate Little Man’ is also another fine showcase of her significant technical ability. The song’s tempo of over 230bpm creates musical intensity and drive throughout the song, and allows Maybelle to demonstrate her exceptional musicianship and physical facility. She maintains a busy melodic line with her thumb throughout the entire song, integrated with a chord accompaniment on the treble strings, all played with remarkable consistency and accuracy. Further, Sara and Maybelle demonstrate tightly honed ensemble skills, expertly aligning their vocal and guitar statement of the melody
during verses\textsuperscript{37}.

**Functional-Textual Guitar Roles**

The song ‘Single Girl, Married Girl’ demonstrates Maybelle’s ability to seamlessly shift between three functional-textural roles within brief periods of time. A transcription of the song’s first verse in figure 2.33 is annotated to show instances of Carter using her bass-strum accompaniment (BSA) and integrated-lead (IL) styles, but also playing extended passages (relative to the Carterian approach) of single-line lead (SLL);

\textsuperscript{37} See appendix B, figure B.1 transcription, for an additional example of Carter’s continuous lead approach during verse 1 of the song ‘Single Girl, Married Girl’ (BE 39752-4, 1927), with annotation of melodic shadowing and deviations.
Tuning: Standard, down 1 fret

A

\[ \begin{align*}
F & \quad \text{Sin-gle girl,} \\
& \quad \text{sin-gle girl,} \\
& \quad \text{she's go-ing dre-ssed}
\end{align*} \]

F
fine.
C
Oh,

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{BSA} & \quad \text{IL} \\
\text{SLL} & \quad \text{BSA} \\
\text{SLL} & \quad \text{BSA}
\end{align*} \]

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{BSA} & \quad \text{she's go-ing dress-ed} \\
& \quad \text{fine.}
\end{align*} \]

F
IL

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{BSA} & \quad \text{SLL} \\
& \quad \text{BSA}
\end{align*} \]
Married girl,
she wears just any kind.

Oh, she
As can be seen in the transcription in figure 2.33, extended breaks between phrases occur in the melodic line, and Maybelle fills these with simple static bass-strum accompaniments (bars 6-8 and 12-14). She also comps while Sara is holding sung melodic notes in bars 4, 10, 18 and 20. Carter at times adds notes in relation to the vocal line (bars 2, 9, 16 and 22) augmenting the melody and integrating with strummed accompaniment on the treble strings. In certain bars, Carter drops into short passages of single-line lead, shadowing only the melodic line with no integrated accompaniment. These instances of single-line lead occur three times within the A and B sections of the verse respectively (A: bars 3, 5, and 11 and B: 17, 19 and 24). The presence of the single-line leads coincides with the most florid part of the melodic line and Maybelle’s approach in these passages is likely driven by the desire to maintain clarity of the line, rather than convolute the florid passages with the presence of both melody and accompaniment. While it would technically have been possible to incorporate comp chords on the second half of the beat in these passages (which are mainly crotchet rhythms), Carter opts instead to omit accompaniment and simply shadow the melody. Whether this choice was intuitive, idiomatic or aesthetic, Carter demonstrates the ability here
to negotiate the profile of the song, effectively functioning in multiple textures depending on musical context and necessity.

The incorporation of brief passages of single-line lead within a predominantly integrated-lead style break are certainly seen less frequently than full integrated-lead breaks, however they are identifiable in a number of other Carter Family songs. A notable occurrence is during the opening break to ‘Wildwood Flower’, which is predominantly played in integrated-lead style. During bars 10-12 and 13-14 of the break, Carter shifts into a monophonic texture, playing two short passages of single-line lead, as seen in figure 2.34;
These instances of single-line lead coincide with the rise of the melody to the 2nd and 1st strings, which while possible, would make maintaining a scratched accompaniment difficult. Instead, Maybelle here inserts single-line lead passages, allowing her to maintain the imitative-
lead approach. This also results in a moment of varied texture, which is particularly vivid within the context of the break, due to its comparative starkness. This moment highlights the effectiveness of Carter’s integrated-lead style, elucidating how her integration of lead and rhythm often gives the illusion of two guitarists playing simultaneously.

**Musical Hierarchy**

Returning again to ‘Single Girl, Married Girl’, while this song can be considered a prime example of a Carter Family song that illuminates Maybelle’s approach of continuous melodic-shadowing, as well as her ability to combine multiple guitar functions, the arrangement also again calls into question issues of musical hierarchy within the Carter Family soundscape. An arrangement of a popular traditional song that could be heard in numerous variants all over Appalachia in the early 20th century, the Carter Family’s version of ‘Single Girl, Married Girl’ was a song that Sara was initially reticent to record, due in part to its subject matter (Doman 2005). Thematically, the song juxtaposes the life of a single girl with that of a married girl, lamenting the burden of young, married Appalachian women;

```
Single girl, single girl, she's going dressed fine, 
    Oh, she's going dressed fine.
Married girl, married girl, she wears just any kind, 
    Oh, she wears just any kind.

Single girl, single girl, she goes the store and buys 
    Oh, she goes the store and buys.
Married girl, oh, married girl, she rocks the cradle and cries 
    Oh, she rocks the cradle and cries.
```

Figure 2.35  The Carter Family, ‘Single Girl, Married Girl’, (BVE 39754-2, 1927). Lyrics.

It is not difficult to relate the narrative of this song to Sara Carter’s own life experience, who at 29 years old, had been married for over a decade, raised three children, and spent
much of her time tending to her home and family without the help of an often absent husband (Zwonitzer 2002). Sara’s reluctance to record this song may have demonstrated an unwillingness to present herself as a complaining woman, or to be perceived as airing her dirty laundry in public (Doman 2005). She was hesitant to record the song but was convinced into doing so on the day of the session by Ralph Peer.

The song, arranged in strophic/verse form, begins and ends with a lead guitar break. Sung verses alternate with solo guitar breaks, with the overall resultant balance of ‘dominant voice’ during the song weighted towards the guitar. Further, as previously explored, each verse features the guitar as a melodic lead consistently shadowing the vocal line. Therefore, this arrangement again effectively elevates the guitar to the level of lead voice within the song.

**Rhythmic Asymmetry and Metric Dissonance**

Close analysis of the song ‘Single Girl, Married Girl’ uncovers a relatively complex metric profile. Instances of rhythmic and metric asymmetry and dissonance were not uncommon in early country music (Townsend 2001), and in fact occur “so frequently in the Carter Family recordings that they are almost as much the rule as the exception” (ibid, p. 163). In an examination of rhythmic asymmetry in the music of the Carter Family, Townsend defines the practice as “any metrical event that is numerically unbalanced or that uses irregular patterning” (ibid., p. 162). In previously transcribed examples in this chapter, we can see a number of instances of this type, such as a full beat extension of the final bar during the verse sections in the song ‘Keep On The Sunnyside’ (figure 2.11), resulting in a 3/2 bar the end of the cut-common verse. Biamonte describes this type of metric dissonance, occurring at the end of a formal section, as a “partial bar link”, which functions in order to create a sense of “momentum leading into the next formal section” of a song (2014). The 12-bar guitar break in ‘I Ain’t Going To Work Tomorrow’ (figure 2.24) also features a partial bar link, extending the final bar of the break in cut-common time, to a bar of 3/2. Further, bar 3 of the break is also extended to a 3/2 bar. While both instances of metric dissonances can be considered
minimally disruptive, the two disruptions within the space of 12 bars create a sense of ambiguity, adding to the excitement of the break. The song ‘Wildwood Flower’ features dissonance at the hypermetric level, with each 19 bar break split into four phrases of 5, 5, 4 and 5 bars respectively (figure 2.34).

In an essay analysing the practice of “metrical disruption” in bluegrass and early country music, Joti Rockwell (2011) features an insightful examination of the music of a number of artists including The Carter Family. Rockwell uses the vernacular term crooked to define music that includes “disruption of an expected pulse layer” (p. 58), and notes that crooked tunes are often metrically evened-out, or straightened, in various performance contexts. Through his research, Rockwell identifies that 67% of Carter Family songs feature disruptions, including the song ‘Single Girl, Married Girl’.

As seen in the earlier transcription of ‘Single Girl’ verse 1 (figure 2.33), while the melodic and harmonic profile of the section is relatively simple, it features asymmetry at the hypermetric level, in addition to a metrically disruptive cadential hemiola in bar 21. Looking more closely, the verse is 26 bars in length, and divided into two sections; a 14-bar A section (bars 1-14) and a 12-bar B section (bars 15-26). The A section is divided into an \( a+b \) phrase of 8 and 6 bars respectively, and the B section is divided into an \( a+b \) phrase of 7 and 5 bars respectively, demonstrating what can be considered constant hypermetric displacement dissonance, in that the established 8 bar unit of the first phrase is disrupted in each of the subsequent phrases.

When returning with the same focus to the transcription of the song’s opening guitar break (seen in figure 2.22), one can also identify instances of metric dissonance. Similar to verse 1, the opening break is divided into an A and B section, equally weighted at 9 bars each. Both sections are divided into an \( a+b \) sub-phrase of 5 and 4 bars respectively, again

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38 Biamonte (2014) defines a cadential hemiola as a type of grouping dissonance “in which the perceived value of the beat or the bar is changed leading into a cadence”.
demonstrating dissonance at the hypermetric level, leading to ambiguity upon listening. Metric dissonance is also immediately apparent within the break, with shifts between triple and duple meter occurring twice within each 9-bar phrase.

While the melodic and harmonic material of the guitar break and verse are almost identical and can be heard as imitative, metrically the guitar and vocal presentations vary considerably. A simple comparison of the beat and bar content of the two sections, shows significant variations (see figure 2.36). When the vocals enter in verse 1 (track time 0:22), Sara modifies the beat content of her statement of the melody in relation to Maybelle’s opening break statement, adding beats at the end of sub-phrases. This results in an A and B section of 28 and 26 beats respectively for the first sung verse, extended in relation to the guitar break statement. Also, Sara’s beat content modifications eliminate almost all instances of metric dissonance, leaving one cadential hemiola in bar 21 of the verse. Using the vernacular terminology offered by Rockwell, Maybelle’s opening guitar break can be considered *crooked*, with the metre shifting between duple and triple every few bars, whereas Sara’s addition of beats keeps the metric profile of the verse more consonant, a *straightening* of Maybelle’s *crooked* melody.
Figure 2.36  The Carter Family, 'Single Girl, Married Girl', (BVE 39754-2, 1927). Harmonic beat structure.
Maybelle’s guitar breaks fall between 20 and 22 beats in length, while the A and B sections of the verses fall between 26 and 28 beats. The overall ambiguity of the metric and hypermetric profile of ‘Single Girl, Married Girl’ can be interpreted in a variety of ways, but what cannot be denied is the resultant excitement, drive and unpredictability of the song. In addition to an effective arrangement, the song also demonstrates a high level of ensemble coordination between Maybelle and Sara, who following each other seamlessly through a constantly changing metric landscape.

According to Doman, ‘Single Girl, Married Girl’ became the “biggest seller of all the sides” (2005 p. 80) recorded by the Carter Family at the Bristol Sessions in 1927, and the commercial success of the record was the impetus behind Victor’s decision to contract the group for a second session in 1928. While there are many elements of this crucial early Carter Family recording that would have appealed to the record buying public in 1927, the dominance of Maybelle Carter on this record is undeniable. Demonstrating her then unique integrated-lead style throughout the song, easily negotiating multiple metric changes, either supporting and/or leading the song’s melodic material, as well as her ensemble interaction with Sara Carter, makes this an outstanding example of Maybelle Carter’s idiotechne in action.

This exploration of Carter’s integrated thumb-lead style has aimed to elucidate a number of important facets of her idiotechne, including her technical abilities and innovations. Her consistent approach to guitar break construction (based on a principle of imitation) found in the analysis of these early Carter Family songs proves to be a unifying factor in Carter’s sound throughout her career, even as she begins to incorporate other, more traditional popular guitar techniques into her playing. While this chapter will now turn to an exploration of Maybelle’s incorporation of those techniques on Carter Family recordings during the 1930s and 40s, the innovation and exceptional nature of her playing from the outset of her career seen in this chapter thus far is difficult to over-emphasise. One can only imagine the excitement, and perhaps awe, felt by listeners during the 1920s when they heard this young woman playing in a
style that was unique at that time, and undoubtedly impressive in its level of technicality. Whether it be non-guitarists who wondered how one person could sound like two playing at the same time, or guitar players wondering how she did what no one else was doing, or even listeners in general who were drawn to the dominant presence of the guitar unifying Carter Family songs from beginning to end, Maybelle Carter’s guitar was an integral part of the Carter Family, one of the most important groups in history of country music. As will be shown later in this chapter, as well as captivating audiences, Maybelle’s innovative style permeated the vocabulary of country music, and subsequent generations of guitar players, with components of her integrated thumb-lead style still identifiable in popular music today.

### 2.5 Carter and Slide

During the first Carter Family recording session in 1927 Maybelle Carter used only her integrated thumb-lead style or a traditional bass-strum accompaniment style. However, during the group’s second session in 1928 (in Camden, N.J.), Maybelle can be heard playing with a slide, using the technique on the songs, ‘Meet Me by the Moonlight, Alone’ (BVE 45020-2, 1928) and ‘Little Darling Pal of Mine’ (BVE 45021-2, 1928). The unique glissando or “melodious, crying sound” (Malone 2010, p. 26) resulting from the use of a sliding device on the strings of an acoustic guitar was a common technique used by both early country and blues players in the American south during the early 20th century. Southern rural blues musicians would often use a knife or bottleneck in the left hand to produce “whining and percussive sounds” (Evans 2001, p. 23), mimicking the emotional wailing quality of the voice. After World War I, a surge in popularity of the Hawaiian guitar style influenced the use of the slide amongst early country musicians (Malone 2010, p. 26). The Hawaiian guitar, with its strings elevated above the fretboard, was played with a metal bar in the left hand (as opposed to fretting notes with the fingers). Standard acoustics were often modified to play in “Hawaiian style” by placing a small block under the strings at the top of the neck.
was then typically laid flat on the lap in order to facilitate ease of left hand movement, with the metal bar slid up and down the strings to create a highly legato articulation of melody notes (Ross 2003). In Hawaiian style the guitar was often played in alternate tunings, most frequently re-tuned to an open D or E chord. In an interview with Seeger, Maybelle Carter describes playing in slide style;

I tuned the strings down, and put a little steel bar under the neck and played on my regular guitar. I did several records like that, anything to get something a little different, you know? We were aware with the auto-harp and guitar there wasn’t much to do with that, you know? (Carter 1963).

As there are no videos of Carter playing slide, it is difficult to know whether she played lap style, or held it in the more traditional position, accessing the strings from under the neck.

The song ‘Meet Me By the Moonlight, Alone’ (BVE 45020-2, 1928) was the first song recorded by The Carter Family at the Camden Session in 1928, and features Sara playing autoharp accompaniment, adopting a simple bass-strum pattern, while Maybelle plays slide in open E tuning. The song begins with a lead guitar break played in slide style;

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39 In open D tuning the strings of the guitar are tuned, from low to high, DADF#AD. In open E they are tuned EBEG#BE respectively. According to Zwonitzer, Maybelle ‘picked up the Hawaiian style listening to Vernon Dalhart’s version of “The Wreck of the Old 97” (1924) which featured Hawaiian guitarist Frank Ferera (2002, p. 185). However, on this record Ferera only plays bass-strum accompaniment.

40 Sokolow states “like many Hawaiian and country players (and some blues players) of the 1920s, Maybelle played slide lap style” (1999, p. 13). Seeger (2000) says little about the nuances of her approach, and Maybelle Carter herself says nothing about how she held the guitar when playing slide in the above-mentioned interview.
As shown in Figure 2.37, Carter plays the slide break in a linear fashion, playing the melody all on the second string. While the use of the slide creates an inherently legato melodic line, Carter embellishes her phrases by adding deeper glissandi at points (bars 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 11 and 12), generally coinciding with the highest notes within sub-phrases. The song is arranged in a verse/chorus form, with consistent melodic and harmonic material used for the verse, chorus, and breaks. The arrangement features a guitar break at the beginning and end of the song, as well as a break after each sung verse and chorus, again showcasing the guitar throughout.

Similar to her approach when using the integrated thumb-lead style, Carter again employs an imitative-lead approach for the opening break of ‘Meet Me by the Moonlight, Alone’, playing a line based on the song’s vocal melody. Carter incorporates the same four classes of melodic deviations when playing this imitative-lead slide break as were identified in her integrated thumb-lead style;
As can be seen in figure 2.38, Carter incorporates pitch additions in bars 4, 8, 12 and 16, in relation to held notes in the vocal line, again likely negotiating issues of instrumental sustain. An instance of rhythmic displacement occurs in bar 2, delaying the entrance of the melodic note, in effect straightening the rhythmic profile of the statement of the melody. Pitch omissions occur in bars 1, 5, 8, 9, 12 and 13, where Carter eliminates dotted quavers and repeated notes found in the vocal line, with one instance of pitch alteration occurring in bar 13.

After the opening break, Carter continues to play continuous-lead throughout the rest of the song, melodically shadowing the vocal line through each subsequent verse and chorus section. Again, this is the same approach frequently seen when Carter was using her integrated thumb-lead style, now applied to playing slide.
An examination of Carter’s approach to playing slide across the Carter Family catalogue demonstrates consistency as well as versatility, applying a similar compositional approach as seen when playing in her integrated thumb-lead style (melodic imitation with four classes of deviations) to a new physical technique\textsuperscript{41}.

During her 1963 interview with Mike Seeger, Maybelle jokes about not being a very accomplished slide player, stating, “I used to try to play a little steel guitar [laughter] but it was bad, I tell you” (Carter 1963). However, on all slide songs examined for this study, Maybelle demonstrates accuracy in terms of intonation and a high level of ensemble integration. She succinctly aligns her guitar lead with Sara’s vocal line, melodically shadowing her partner closely, creating a nuanced yet highly integrated ensemble texture.

The Carter Family recorded 43 songs in total during the years 1929 and 1930, and of those, 12 feature Maybelle playing slide. Fundamentally, Maybelle takes the same approach on each of these songs, continuously shadowing the vocal line throughout sung verse/chorus sections\textsuperscript{42}. While tallied figures for the years 1928 to 1930 demonstrate an increasing number of Carter Family songs featuring Maybelle playing slide (1928: 2 of 12 songs = 17\%, 1929: 6 of 24 songs = 25\%, 1930: 6 of 19 songs = 32\%), notably after 1930, there are no Carter Family songs recorded that feature Maybelle playing slide. Further, in 1935, when the Carter Family moved to a new record label (ARC) and re-recorded many of their popular earlier sides (Zwonitzer 2002), including ‘Meet Me By the Moonlight, Alone’ (ARC 17522-2, 1935) and ‘Little Darling Pal of Mine’ (ARC 17519-1, 1935), Maybelle re-arranged her guitar parts,

\textsuperscript{41}See appendix B, figure B.2 transcription, for an additional example of Carter’s approach to playing slide on the opening break of the song ‘Little Darling, Pal of Mine’ (BVE 45021-2, 1928). See appendix B, figure B.3 transcription, for a melodic comparison of Carter’s opening slide break and the chorus vocal line on the same song.

\textsuperscript{42}The only song in which she deviates from this approach is “Where Shall I Be” (BVE 64717-2, 1930), on which she only plays slide lead during the guitar break sections.
playing simple bass-strum accompaniments during verse and chorus sections of the songs and re-working her breaks using her integrated thumb-lead style, eliminating the use of the slide.\(^4\)

In *Country Music USA* (2010), a definitive history of American country music, Bill Malone acknowledges that Jimmie Rodgers, who also recorded his first hits at the Bristol sessions in 1927, “popularized a number of sounds and styles […] that made their way into country music” (p. 86) including the slide guitar which was featured on several of his recordings. While certainly neither Rodgers nor Maybelle Carter were the progenitor of the slide technique, Carter’s frequent utilisation of the style during the late 1920s, on some of the most commercially successful country records of the era, can also surely be considered a factor in establishing the slide guitar as an essential style marker within country music.

2.6 Carter and Fingerstyle

Beginning in 1930, Maybelle can be heard playing in a traditional fingerpicking style on seven Carter Family recordings. In an interview with Mike Seeger (Carter 1963) Carter describes learning to play fingerstyle from Lesley ‘Esley’ Riddle (1905-1980), a musician with whom A.P. Carter travelled extensively on “song gathering” trips. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the Carter Family relied heavily on arrangements of traditional materials, and A.P. travelled throughout the Appalachian region in order to discover new songs. According to Lesley Riddle, A.P. met an African-American musician called John Henry Lee in Kingsport, Tennessee, who subsequently introduced him to Riddle (Riddle 1963). Riddle and A.P. struck up a working friendship and soon A.P. invited Riddle to accompany him when he went on the road, collecting new material for Carter Family song arrangements (Riddle 1963). Riddle took on the self-described role of human “tape recorder” (Zwontizer 2002, p. 131) memorising melodies and lyrics in order to teach them to Maybelle and Sara when they returned home. The Carter Family would then arrange the newly collected material into songs for the group to

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\(^4\) This could attest to the popularity of the Scratch style by the mid-1930s, and importantly, the audience’s association of Maybelle Carter with her Scratch technique by that point in her career.
record. According to Maybelle, Riddle taught her some of his own songs and taught her how to play in a traditional country blues fingerpicking style (Carter 1963).

On Carter Family recordings which feature Maybelle fingerpicking, Carter plays alternating bass lines with her thumb, whilst playing syncopated melodic lines on the treble strings with her finger(s). This approach to fingerstyle playing is consistent with Andrew Cohen’s description of the “classic eastern alternating bass” blues guitar style, which he defines as;

Four thumb strokes per measure alternating between a low and a high bass string. Melodies, usually played with the index (and occasionally also the middle) finger, fall between or together with the thumb notes, so that a kind of counterpoint is established. The thumb notes form a regular rhythmic and harmonic backdrop against which the melody can syncopate (Cohen 1996, p. 464).

During an unissued live recording of a performance from the 1963 Newport Folk Festival, Maybelle Carter can be heard playing in a style that she describes as “the ole thumb and finger style”\(^44\). In spoken commentary after her performance, Carter states that “a lot of people use two or three fingers…but I’ve never been able to do that”, and that “I just pick with my forefinger [...] and my thumb”. The one available video of Maybelle playing fingerstyle visually corroborates these statements\(^45\).

The first song recorded by the Carter Family that features Maybelle playing fingerstyle, ‘The Cannonball’ (BVE 59979-1, 1930), was recorded for Victor in May 1930. The song is arranged in an alternating verse/guitar break form, and played in the key of C Major, with the

\(^{44}\) A recording of this un-issued performance can be accessed here; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4GuN8cc7rXY (Accessed 3 June 2017).

\(^{45}\) This video can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZYCDmq473s (Accessed 22 May 2017).
guitar likely in standard tuning with a capo at fret two. Unusually, the song features A.P. singing lead vocals, with no harmony vocals. Sara plays autoharp accompaniment in a simple bass-strum style, while Maybelle plays a continuous fingerstyle lead part throughout the entire song. The guitar dominates the arrangement of ‘The Cannonball’, featuring two independent guitar breaks (guitar break A and B), with sung verses interposed between breaks.

The song begins with a 24-bar break, comprised of a 12-bar section repeated twice (GB-A1/2). The melodic line is highly syncopated and Maybelle juxtaposes the syncopated line against steady alternating basses played with the thumb, seen in figure 2.39;

![Guitar Break A1](image)

Figure 2.39 The Carter Family, ‘The Cannonball’ (BVE 59979-1, 1930. Track time: 0:00-0:14). Guitar break A1.

46 ‘The Cannonball’s sounding key is actually somewhere between Db and D, so it is likely that Carter was using a capo at 2, but the guitar is tuned slightly flat.
47 The addition of alternating bass notes in GB-A2 creates a slight modification of the bar 1 repeat.
When assessing the genesis of guitar break A melodic material, via a comparison with the vocal melody of verse 1, it is clear that Maybelle again employed an imitative-lead approach, while playing in fingerstyle;

![Guitar transcription](image)

Figure 2.40 The Carter Family, ‘The Cannonball’ (BVE 59979-1, 1930). Verse 1 vocal line (0:28-0:43) and guitar break A1 lead line (0:00-0:15). Melodic comparison with annotation of melodic deviations and thumb bass-line removed for clarity (original key: D major).

A transcription of the verse 1 vocal line, alongside the guitar break A melodic line in figure 2.40 shows melodic material played by Carter with her index finger during guitar break A, with the steady-thumb bass-line removed for clarity. As can be seen, Maybelle imitates the material from the verse 1 vocal line (annotated in squares in the guitar line) with some instances of pitch omission and alteration in bars 3, 7, 8 and 10. The primary deviations occur at the rhythmic level, with many instances of displacement occurring due to Carter

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48 Each of Maybelle guitar breaks is in cut-common time throughout, as are verses 2 and 3. The one exception occurs in bar 2 of the first verse, where the bar is extended to 6 beats. Maybelle follows A.P. in this bar, simply extending the bar with repeated pitches.
syncopating her melody, with the guitar often anticipating entrances by half a beat in relation to the vocal statement. Further, Carter adds numerous extra pitches to her guitar break (annotated with blue colour in the guitar line in figure 2.40). Rather than these notes being heard as deviations to the melody, they function as a mid-level accompaniment, in contrast to the steady alternating bass-layer played by her thumb. Again, here Carter is using the guitar in multiple functional-textural roles, similar to that seen previously, but now using the guitar to assert the melodic, accompanimental and bass layers simultaneously.

In addition to an imitative-lead approach used in guitar break A, Maybelle performs in a melodic-shadowing capacity throughout the subsequent verses, accompanying A.P.’s sung vocals with guitar break material, which in turn functions as a fingerpicked shadow lead throughout the verse. After the first verse, Maybelle introduces a contrasting 9-bar guitar break (guitar break B) based on newly composed material, rather than melodic imitation;
During the pick-up bar of guitar break B, Carter emphatically iterates the root and $\text{^b7}$ of the tonic chord (C7), striking the diad with an $i$ finger downstroke three times, following a bass-note played on the downbeat of the bar. The C7 harmony in the pick-up bar functions in a secondary-dominant capacity, temporarily tonicising the F major chord implied in the first full bar of the break (figure 2.41, bar 1). In bar 3, Carter again re-iterates the C7 chord, this time within an extended bar of 3/2, which functions as a cadential hemiola, further establishing the new key. Maybelle returns to cut-common time in the following bar, whilst playing an F major chord, which functions as both the new temporary tonic, and in its original sub-dominant function in the song’s home key of C major. The home key is then brought back by a simple
I-V-I progression in bars 6-8.

Carter follows guitar break B with a repetition of the first break (A), before allowing A.P. to re-enter for the second verse. The remainder of the song follows this format of vocal verse, break B, break A, again asserting the guitar as the dominant voice on the track. With a tempo of around 200bpm, the song showcases Maybelle’s impressive technical abilities, along with her capacity and willingness as a player to incorporate a new technique, whilst relying on her now established compositional practices.

The Carter Family went on to record six other songs during the 1930s that feature Maybelle playing fingerstyle (see figure 2.5). On songs such as ‘The Cannonball’ and ‘Lonesome for You’ (BVE 69350-2, 1931) Carter plays fingerstyle during verse, chorus and guitar break sections. However, on other songs she’s plays a fingerstyle break, but uses a bass-strum accompaniment during verse/chorus sections. An excellent example of this approach can be heard on the song ‘My Old Cottage Home’ (BVE 69346-2, 1931), which features verse, chorus and guitar break sections, each based on the same harmonic structure. During the verse and chorus sections, Maybelle plays in a bass-strum accompaniment style, but during the breaks she plays in fingerpicking style, playing a syncopated lead line on the treble strings whilst playing alternating basses with her thumb. Carter opens the song with a fingerstyle break, as seen in figure 2.42;
The melodic material for the opening break to ‘My Old Cottage Home’ is again based on the principle of melodic-imitation, with Carter using material drawn from the subsequent verse’s vocal melody to craft the break;
Figure 2.43  The Carter Family 'My Old Cottage Home' (BVE 69346-2, 1931). Verse 1 vocal line (0:22-0:40) and opening guitar break lead line (0:00-0:21). Melodic comparison, with annotation of melodic deviations and thumb bass-line removed for clarity (original key: F major).

The transcription of the melodic line from the opening guitar break, seen in figure 2.43, shows treble string material played by Carter with her index finger during the opening guitar break, alongside the verse 1 vocal line. Again, instances of pitch omission, addition and alteration occur within Carter's line, however, the most significant deviations occur at the
rhythmic level, with displacements identifiable in bars 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 10 11 and 13. Most of these displacements anticipate pitches in relation to the vocal line, subsequently falling on a weak beat, resulting in a syncopated feel to Carter's melodic statement, which is highly effective musically when felt against the straight crotchet rhythm of the bass-line played by her thumb, and in contrast to the relatively straight profile of the verse melody.

Further, the orchestration of ‘My Old Cottage Home’ allows for an insightful analysis of Maybelle and Sara’s approach to playing as a guitar duo. The song features A.P. on lead vocals, and during the entire song Sara plays simple bass-strum accompaniment with some walking bass lines on the guitar. While the song sounds in F major and features a simple I, IV, V chord vocabulary, Sara plays in the key of G with her guitar in standard tuning but down 2 frets. Maybelle, also in standard tuning, plays with a capo at the 5th fret, which allows her to play in the key position of C, but sound in F. After a single bar run-up by Maybelle, Sara begins a bass-strum accompaniment, whilst Maybelle plays pick-up material for her fingerstyle break;

\footnote{It is possible that Maybelle has her guitar in standard tuning, dropped 2 frets, like Sara. In that case, she would be playing with a capo at the 7th fret.}
As seen in figure 2.44, during the opening break Sara walks the basses between chord changes (bars 2, 4, 8, 10 and 12) with her lines complimenting Maybelle’s syncopated treble melody, at times overpowering Maybelle’s alternating basses (likely due to the fidelity of the recording).

During the subsequent verse and chorus sections of the song (which follow the same harmonic profile as of the opening break but with a varied melody), Sara continues to play in bass-strum style, playing an accompaniment consistent with that which she played in the opening break. However, during these sections Maybelle switches from fingerstyle, to a bass-strum accompaniment style, and the interaction between Maybelle and Sara’s guitar parts,
especially their walking basses, creates great interest in the harmonic layer of the song;
As can be seen in the transcription in figure 2.45, during the transition between the I and IV chord in bars 2-3, Sara and Maybelle play walking basses in contrary motion, which is possible due to the pair playing in two different key positions. Maybelle steps down chromatically from the root of her I chord (played in a C shape) on the fifth string to the 3rd of the IV chord (played in an F shape) whilst Sara ascends diatonically from the root of her I chord on the sixth string (played in a G shape) to the root of the IV on the fifth string (played in a C shape). In bar 4-5, both players walk diatonically from the root of their respective IV chord shapes, down to the root of the I chord.
At the end of the first phrase (bars 7-8 in figure 2.45) Maybelle and Sara utilise a call-and-response walking-bass figure. In bar 7, Maybelle plays a chromatic ascending line from the root to the third of her dominant chord, while Sara plays bass-strum accompaniment. Maybelle then passes the line to Sara, who responds with a descending diatonic bass-line in bar 8, which connects the root of her dominant chord to the root of the tonic on the downbeat of bar 9, effectively functioning as a turnaround into the start of the second phrase. During phrase two (bars 9-16) Sara and Maybelle use most of the same walking-bass gestures, apart from the call-and-response at the cadence.

During the song’s subsequent verse and chorus sections, the women repeat with great accuracy the accompaniment parts played in the first verse. The use of contrasting, and at times interactive bass lines, whilst playing a similar bass-strum accompaniment pattern provides a nuanced and effective accompanimental layer in the song. Further, the contrasting range and timbre of Sara’s guitar, played in first position, and Maybelle’s guitar, capoed to play in a higher region of the neck, creates a rich timbre within the songs accompanimental layer, demonstrating Sara and Maybelle’s highly effective approach to playing in a guitar-duo format.

As with the earlier examination of Carter’s approach to playing slide, this brief examination of her approach to playing fingerstyle on Carter Family songs from the early 1930s, again shows Maybelle’s versatility, as well as the adherence to a standardised compositional approach, one of her now definable idiotechniques, whether playing in integrated thumb-lead, slide or fingerpicking style.

2.7 Carter and the Flatpick

During the mid-1930s, Maybelle began to record Carter Family songs using a flatpick, rather than playing with thumb and fingers in her right hand, and subsequently recorded approximately 39 records in this style. In the aforementioned interview with Mike Seeger, Maybelle describes beginning to incorporate the flatpick technique around the time that the
Carter Family recorded the songs ‘Jealous Hearted Me’ (Decca 61137-A, 1936) and ‘You Are My Flower’ (Decca 64101-A, 1938)\(^{50}\). Carter mentions that her brother had played guitar and that “he always used a pick” (Carter, 1963.). When asked by the interviewer, “how did you start [to play with a pick] when you had used your fingers all that time?”, Carter replied; “I knew I had to get a different lick, because it was a faster tune and I couldn’t do it with the [thumb] pick” (ibid.). In essence, Carter here describes that as her lead lines became more intricate, especially within higher tempo songs, playing leads with only a thumb-pick would have become untenable. When using a thumb-pick, most players are only able to play a single line with all downstrokes, which limits articulation speed. Using a flatpick typically allows a player to incorporate ‘alternate picking’ (usually down-picking on strong beats, and up-picking on weak beats), resulting in the ability to play legato lines at faster tempos \(^{51}\).

One sourceable video that shows Carter playing with a flatpick comes from an appearance with Sara on ‘The Johnny Cash Show’, recorded sometime between 1969-1971\(^{52}\). The pair can be seen playing an abbreviated version of the song ‘You are My Flower’, with Sara on autoharp and Maybelle playing guitar. While the video angles are not conducive to a thorough right-hand analysis, it is possible to note that Carter plays with a relatively standard right hand position, holding the flatpick between her thumb and fingers, and picking from the wrist\(^{53}\).

In a previously cited interview, Carter mentions ‘Jealous Hearted Me’ (Decca 61137-A)

\(^{50}\) Seeger states that ‘Carter’s Blues’ (BVE 56584-1) recorded in 1929, and ‘Let the Church Roll On’ (BVE 56584-1) from 1931 may have been played with a flatpick, due to the speed of the bass lines (2000, p. 7). It has been taken in to consideration that a number of songs recorded before 1936 that sound like they could be played with her integrated-thumb lead style were actually played with a flatpick, due to their articulation speed. This accounts for the use of approximate figures in the corpus analysis data in reference to integrated-thumb lead and flatpick style songs.

\(^{51}\) Sokolow states “like most flatpickers, [Maybelle] played downstrokes on the downbeats and upstrokes on the upbeats” (1999, p.14).


\(^{53}\) The video of Maybelle and Sara playing on The Johnny Cash Show can be accessed here; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I3eWqcR5WCY (Accessed 13 March 2018).
as one of the earliest songs she recorded in a flatpick style. In 1936, the Carter Family had again changed record companies, recording over two-dozen records in June of that year for Decca (Zwonitzer 2002). During these sessions, Maybelle recorded lead breaks in both integrated thumb-lead and flatpick style. ‘Jealous Hearted Me’ is a representation of her early flatpick style, which proves to become more intricate in later years.

The song ‘Jealous Hearted Me’ is arranged in a strophic/verse form, using a modified 12-bar blues structure. The song begins with a guitar break, and subsequently alternates breaks with sung verses, for a total of five breaks and four verses. The song features Maybelle and Sara playing as a guitar duo, with Sara playing a simple bass-strum accompaniment throughout. Maybelle plays single-string lead during the breaks, and joins Sara in a simple bass-strum accompaniment during the verses. Both guitars are in standard tuning, and Maybelle plays in the key position of C, but with a capo at the third fret.

While the song’s tempo of 176bpm is not as fast as some of the previously examined integrated thumb-lead breaks, those breaks typically incorporated crotchets as the quickest note value, whereas the ‘Jealous Hearted Me’ break features a predominantly quaver rhythmic profile. The use of a flatpick for this lead line allowed Maybelle to alternate-pick, therefore more easily incorporating quavers and increasing articulation speed.

54 A second version of this song was recorded during the same 1936 Decca sessions, produced for the Associated Program Service Transcriptions (VLCS 102109-1).
As can be seen in figure 2.46, during the song’s opening break, Carter plays a swing-feel single-line lead in first position, with a noticeable lack of slurs, using primarily diatonic scale material (with $^b7$ upper neighbours in bars 3 and 8). Although playing with a new right hand technique, she again employs her established imitative-lead approach, basing the break on the vocal melody from the verse, with some deviations.
As can be seen figure 2.47, a transcription of the opening guitar break melody and verse one sung melody shows close melodic imitation in the first three bars, but by bar four there becomes a noticeable rhythmic divergence between the two lines. While the pitch content and melodic contour stays relatively consistent, Maybelle’s rhythmic profile is predominantly aligned with the tactus, whereas Sara’s line features various instances of syncopation. Maybelle adds counter-melodic fills to her line during bars 7 and 11, which function as walking bass-lines, and occur in places in which Sara holds pitches. Importantly, in this break Maybelle demonstrates a continuity of compositional approach, relying fundamentally on the principle of melodic-imitation at the outset of the break, but diverging from the principal with a slightly
looser rhythmic interpretation of the line.

In the previously cited interview with Mike Seeger, Carter noted the song ‘You are My Flower’ when discussing her early incorporation of the flatpick. This song, written by Maybelle (Sokolow 1999) and recorded by The Carter Family in 1938, further exemplifies the development of her lead approach when incorporating the flatpick, in particular the continued digression from her established strictly-imitative lead style. On this song Carter plays in C position, with guitar in standard tuning, but tuned down two frets to sound in the key of Bb major. In the opening 12-bar guitar break of the song, Carter plays a flatpicked single-line lead melody, while Sara plays a simple bass-strum accompaniment on the guitar;

Figure 2.48 The Carter Family, ‘You are My Flower’, (Decca 64101-A, 1938. Track time 0:00-0:17). Opening flatpicked guitar break.

As shown in figure 2.48, after a two-bar introductory vamp outlining the tonic chord,

55 See appendix B, figure B.4 transcription, for an additional example of Carter’s flatpick approach during the opening break of the song ‘My Dixie Darling’ (Decca 61128-A, 1936), with annotation of embellishments. See appendix B, figure B.5 transcription, for a melodic comparison of Carter’s opening flatpicked break and the verse 1 vocal line on the same song.
Carter plays a fluid lead line constructed of diatonic material, with a slight bend on a reiterated ^b7 in bar 5 (beat 2), functioning as an embellishment of the natural ^7 played on the following beat. Although Carter stays in first position, which has shown to be her established playing area, the melodic line covers almost the entire range of pitches available in that position, a noticeably wider range than when playing in her integrated-thumb lead style.

During the verse and chorus sections of the song, Maybelle divides her workload between playing bass-strum accompaniment (with the flatpick) in order to support Sara’s vocal line, and interjecting short single-line lead breaks at the end of Sara’s sung phrases. The multifunctional approach of the guitar in these sections is similar to that seen in the previous analysis of songs that Carter played in her integrated thumb-lead style.

![Figure 2.49 The Carter Family ‘You are My Flower’, (Decca 64101-A, 1938. Track time 0:17-0:32). Verse 1 with annotation of guitar and voice responsorial interaction (original key: Bb major).](image)

As seen in a transcription of the guitar and vocal parts in the first verse of ‘You are My Flower’, shown in figure 2.49, during bars 1-3, 6-10 and 12-13, Carter uses a traditional bass-
strum accompaniment style to support the sung melody. However, during bars 4-5 and 11-12, she switches function, playing a single-line lead melody. These instances of single-line material are derived from the opening guitar break, but in this context are heard as staggered imitations of the vocal line, noticeably related in pitch and contour to the sung material in the immediately preceding bars. As seen in figure 2.49, the guitar line in bars 4-5 mimics the contour and pitch range of the vocal line in bars 2-3. Similarly, bars 11-12 in the guitar line mimic the pitch content and contour of bar 10-11 in the vocal line. At these points, the guitar is interacting in a call and response fashion with Sara’s vocal line, in addition to continuing the Carterian principle of melodic imitation.

In conclusion, as well as affording a brief insight into the song-writing abilities of Maybelle Carter, ‘You are My Flower’ again demonstrates the guitar functioning in multiple roles, within the context of a varied physical approach (flatpick). In addition to incorporating the musical principle of call and response, Carter harnesses the physical possibilities of the flatpick technique, creating an imitative and involved lead break. Played at around 220bpm with a swing feel, Carter effortlessly switches between single-line melodies and bass-strum accompaniment patterns while also singing intricate vocal harmonies, again showcasing her formidable musicianship.

Maybelle’s increased incorporation of, and experimentation with, the flatpick during the late 1930s and early 40s are further testament to Carter’s technical and musical versatility, as well as her willingness to develop new techniques to best serve the Carter Family repertoire. Further, the incorporation of this approach to playing lead, some nine years into her recording career, demonstrates Maybelle to be a player continuously evolving throughout her tenure as a recording artist. The Carter Family’s approach to song arrangement and vocal harmonies

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56 The song ‘Coal Miners Blues’ (Decca 64104-A, 1938), recorded at the same session as ‘You Are My Flower’ also features Maybelle playing in a lead style break, demonstrating the same use of call and response between the guitar and vocal lines during the songs verses. See Sokolow (1999) for a transcription.

57 See appendix B, figure B.6, for an additional example of a Maybelle Carter composition, as well as her flatpick approach, on the song ‘Buddies in the Saddle’ (Okeh C 3351-1, 1940), with annotation of melodic embellishments.
during this period, as well as Maybelle Carter's flatpicked lead style, should be recognised as analogous to elements of bluegrass, a sub-genre of country music that was developing during this same period in the United States. While the style-markers of bluegrass are considered “forged” by “the father of bluegrass’ Bill Monroe (Neal 2012, p. 127-134), the musical drive, virtuosity and ensemble interaction of the Carter Family demonstrated on their later recordings are analogous to Monroe’s signature ensemble style, and could be read as part of the development of the sub-genre.

2.8 Maybelle after The Carter Family

Throughout the late 1930s and early 40s, Maybelle Carter effectively negotiated and incorporated developing guitar techniques that had become standard in both country and other genres of American popular music. While Carter was able tocompetently harness these new styles and techniques, she also continued to draw upon her innovative integrated thumb-lead style. Further, a defining facet of her idiotechne, the consistent application of an imitative-lead approach to break construction, whether playing in integrated thumb-lead, slide, fingerpicking or flatpick style, gave her a definitive and recognisable voice across the Carter Family catalogue.

In March 1943, after 16 years of commercial success, the Carter Family officially disbanded. During the 1930s, both Sara and Maybelle’s children had begun performing with the Carter Family and in June 1943, after the break-up of the original group, Maybelle formed a new group with her daughters Anita, Helen and June, calling themselves ‘The Carter Sisters and Mother Maybelle’. Each daughter was a talented multi-instrumentalist and vocalist in her own right and during the 1940s and fifties the group gained commercial success as performing and recording artists, producing albums and taking up residencies with a number of national radio stations. The Carter Sisters performed a mixture of traditional Carter Family songs, as well as contemporary country material (Zwonitzer 2002). During the 1960s Maybelle worked
on solo recording projects, as both a guitarist and auto-harpist and made regular appearances on US television shows. During the folk revival movement, renewed interest in traditional early country music inspired Maybelle and Sara to regroup (A.P. had passed away in 1960). The duo recorded an album, ‘Historic Reunion’, in 1966 (ibid.) and performed at influential folk revival events such as the Newport Folk Festival. The Original Carter Family were inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1970, and Maybelle continued to perform well into the 1970s, recording as a soloist and with artists such as Johnny Cash and The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band (ibid.). After a number of years of ill health, Maybelle Carter passed away on October 22, 1978, leaving an indelible legacy on the history of the guitar in popular music.

2.9 Maybelle Carter, Influence and Legacy

According to Carter Family historian, Charles Wolfe, “it is hard to overestimate the importance of the Carter Family to country music” (Wolfe 2000, p. 41). This sentiment is echoed in many music history texts, and it seems incontestable that the Carter Family’s style and material formed the backbone of modern commercial country music. The same can also be said for Maybelle Carter’s pioneering and innovative guitar style. Credited as being the guitarist “who above any other single performer encouraged the use of the guitar as a lead instrument” in country music, (Carr 1995, p. 95), her influence can be identified in many forms, via the overall transformation and integration of the guitar as a lead instrument in country music to the explicit imitation of her integrated thumb-lead style by many players. In Jeffrey Noonan’s research on the guitar in America at the turn of the twentieth century, he describes Carter’s style as part of a “stylistic blood line” (Noonan 2004, p.3) that fed the roots of honky-tonk and country and western music. When considering the rise of the guitar to perhaps the most integral instrument in popular music during the twentieth century, Maybelle Carter was in the exceptional position of being a true pioneer.

In his historical exploration of the country music genre, Bill C. Malone (2010) refers to
Carter’s style as “much copied” and “one that attracted generations of guitar pickers”. He further describes how, amongst guitar players, it became the “height of accomplishment to learn the Maybelle Carter style” (p. 66), a sentiment which is echoed time and again by historians and players alike. In the history of popular guitar styles, there are very few guitarists who have a specific technique named after them and Maybelle Carter, whose style is often synonymously referred to as the Carter Scratch, Carter Lick or the Carter Style, is one of those few. During the late 1930s and forties, subsequent generations of guitar players post-Carter demonstrate her influence on their style in both explicit and implicit ways. Chet Atkins, an iconic guitarist and music producer, known as “one of the finest guitarists in all of popular music” (Waksman 2001, p. 75), considered Carter’s style to be “original”, describing how he had “never heard anybody else do it before her” (Oermann 1996 p. 26). Atkins was in fact hired as a lead guitarist for the Carter Sisters and Mother Maybelle, and credits his tenure as sideman for that group as being influential in the development of his own career (Atkins and Neely 1974, p. 150). Legendary bluegrass banjo player and guitarist Earl Scruggs described Maybelle Carter as his “idol” (Glaser 2001, p. 249), learning to play in her style as a young man. During the folk revival of the late 1950s and sixties, Carter’s lineage and influence became more explicitly quoted by artists who endeavoured to uncover and re-discover music from the early country era. Iconic urban-folk figures, Woody Guthrie (who re-recorded or re-arranged many Carter Family songs as material for his own recordings) and Bob Dylan, can be heard playing in the Carter style on record and Dylan describes how he incorporated elements of the Carter style into his early style (Klein 1980, p. 56; Dylan 2004, p. 157). Virtuosic players such as Norman Blake (Ferguson 1983) and Doc Watson (Ferguson 1978) also explicitly

58 An interesting aside is that one of the only other guitarists in popular music history to have had a style named after them is Merle Travis, a country guitarist who followed closely after Carter. Travis developed a style in the 1930s that can be defined as fingerstyle lead guitar, using thumb to play alternating bass notes and fingers to play melody. This style is similar to the style that Carter demonstrated on recordings in 1930s and that many blues guitarists had been working with, as described earlier in this chapter.
credit the Carter style as being influential in the development of their own style.

Here, it is perhaps important to consider the history-writing surrounding Maybelle Carter and her innovations. Although Lesley Riddle acknowledges meeting the Carters around 1930 (Riddle 1963), a number of years after the Carter Family’s first recording session in 1927 at which Maybelle skilfully demonstrated her innovative, integrated thumb-lead style, some sources describe Lesley Riddle as developing or teaching Maybelle her unique Carter Scratch style (Willis 1992; Smith 1997; Kingsbury 2012). This literal ‘writing out’ or “exscription” (Fast 2008, p.159) of Carter’s innovation can simply be read as an oversight on the part of the researchers, but these oversights perpetuate the common narrative in popular music history of the lead guitar being an exclusively male domain.

While Maybelle Carter’s influence can be documented both aurally and biographically through the style of later players, what is perhaps most significant is Carter’s implied lineage; establishing the guitar as a lead instrument in one of the main streams of American popular music. While many other guitar players can be considered complicit in establishing the guitar as a lead instrument in early popular music styles (such as Charlie Christian in jazz and Rosetta Tharpe in gospel/R&B), it is notable that Maybelle Carter was pioneering the melodic lead possibilities of the instrument within the country genre as early as the 1920s.

2.10 Summary

In conclusion, Maybelle Carter can unequivocally be considered one the pioneers of the guitar in early popular music. As a rhythm player, she effectively adhered to many of the anticipated norms of the early country style, using a simple chord vocabulary and traditional bass-strum style of accompaniment, often embellished with alternating or walking bass lines.

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59 Willis’ “Americas Music: A History of Bluegrass Music” describes Riddle as the “main influence for Carter’s guitar style” (1992, p. 5). Kingsbury and McCall’s “The Encyclopaedia of Country Music” states that “influenced by Lesley Riddle, Maybelle came up with her own style of picking” (2012 p.77) Also, Smith’s accompanying booklet to the “American Folkways Anthology” describe Carter’s style as being “learned from Riddle” (1997, p.44).
While these devices were not unusual within the style at the time, Carter standardised her engagement with them via the use of recurrent modular rhythm cells.

As a lead guitar player, Carter developed a then-unique and innovative way to integrate lead and rhythm simultaneously, an approach that went on to be significantly influential, both within country music and other genres. Her integrated thumb-lead approach enabled her to play melodic lines on the bass strings of the guitar, whilst maintain a strummed accompaniment on the treble strings with her fingers. Her skilful amalgamation of rhythm and lead functions allowed the guitar to be featured on lead breaks on almost every Carter Family recording, unifying the group’s sound across their catalogue. Further, Maybelle’s approach to break construction was highly systematic, drawing primarily on the principle of melodic imitation. Rather than incorporating newly composed material, Maybelle constructed breaks that imitated the vocal profile of the song, creating unity. Inherently aware of the nuances of her instrument, Carter consistently deployed a number of strategic melodic deviations within her lead lines, when necessary, in order to maintain her integrated rhythm and imitative-lead approach.

As an ensemble member, Carter was highly effective, navigating her role as the only lead instrument in the Carter Family group, switching between accompaniment and lead roles wherever musically necessary. On a number of songs, Maybelle played integrated leads throughout, effectively functioning as a second voice. Carter Family songs often incorporated metric dissonance for interest, and both Maybelle and the other members of the group navigated these instances seamlessly, demonstrating excellent arrangement and musicianship skills.

In addition to introducing an influential style of lead guitar playing into the popular canon, Carter effectively assimilated other normative stylistic practices, including the use of a slide, fingertstyle and flatpick techniques. Her incorporation of these varied styles demonstrates Carter’s versatility and technical skill as a guitar player. However, while incorporating these
new styles, she always demonstrated her core idiotechne, drawing on her imitative lead approach throughout her career.
A review of Memphis Minnie’s performance at a Chicago nightclub on New Year’s Eve 1942 was written by the eminent Langston Hughes and published in the 9th January, 1943 edition of the *Chicago Defender*. The opening line describes the musician sitting atop an icebox, "beating out" a blues tune on an electric guitar. The review continues:

She hits a few deep chords at random, leans forward ever so slightly over her guitar, bows her head and begins to beat out a good old steady down-home rhythm on the strings - a rhythm so contagious that often it makes the crowd holler out loud. Then Minnie smiles. Her gold teeth flash for a split second. Her ear-rings tremble. Her left hand with dark red nails moves up and down the strings of the guitar’s neck. Her right hand with the dice ring on it picks out the tune, throbs out the rhythm, beats out the blues (Hughes, 1943).

Hughes goes on to describe the dichotomy of Minnie’s presence, a “well dressed woman” who on the street could have been mistaken for an “old maid school teacher”. Yet on that night, like many others in her career, Minnie captivated the audience with her voice (“hard and strong for a little woman”), her sly sense of humour and perhaps most of all, her command of the electric guitar. The agency afforded to her through harnessing the instrument is apparent in Hughes’ words, who describes how “things cry through the strings on Memphis Minnie’s electric guitar, amplified to machine proportions (...) electric welders plus a rolling mill” (ibid.)

As the only blueswoman of her era to gain significant commercial success and recognition as an instrumentalist, Memphis Minnie can be defined as a unique character in the
history of the blues. Earning a reputation with both audiences and performers alike as a “tough, creative guitarist and singer” (Palmer 1981, p.110), Minnie recorded prolifically between 1929 and 1953, for numerous companies including Decca, Columbia, Victor, and Chess Records. Due to her versatility and skill as a guitarist and singer, by all accounts Minnie was one of the most popular and commercially successful artists in the blues field during the 1930s and 40s. During her career Minnie recorded numerous guitar duo and combo sides, on which she was often the featured singer, as well as self-accompanied fingerstyle country blues songs. Most notably, on almost all of Minnie’s recordings she played lead guitar (Miller 2013; Garon 2014), assuming the dominant guitarist’s role in the group, a position unusual for a female instrumentalist, both then and now.

In parallel to Maybelle Carter, despite Minnie’s unique position in popular guitar history, there has been little academic research focusing on the specifics of her idiotechne. Much of the biographical information in this chapter has been drawn from Paul Garon’s *Women with Guitar: Memphis Minnie’s Blues* (2014). In this insightful study of Minnie and her music, Garon’s initial chapters “provide a chronology of Memphis Minnie from her birth to her death, in the words of her friends and relatives”, with information “supplemented by material from printed sources” (p. 27). Garon then turns to an interpretive analysis of the lyrical content and thematic ideas present in Minnie’s songs, considering them “products of a specific cultural moment, acted upon by conflicting forces of gender, race and class” (ibid). While Garon acknowledges Minnie’s “remarkable” skill as a player (p. 45), a close analysis of her playing style is not undertaken, due to the constraints of his chosen focus. Similarly, many eminent blues scholars and historians have acknowledged Minnie’s popularity (Palmer 1981), commercial success (Wald 2004), influence (Davis 2003; Evans 1982) and “formidable guitar technique” (Oliver 1972, p. 122), with Titon identifying how she had “few equals on the

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60 Oliver defines Minnie as an “outstanding blues personality” (1972, p. 122) and Titon states that along with Big Bill Broonzy, Minnie was the “most popular blues singer(s) in Chicago” in the early 40s (1994, p. 90). According to Wald, she was the eighth most recorded blues musician in the U.S. between 1928 and 1942 (2004, p. 41).
Although establishing Minnie as an integral part of the history of the blues, these scholars also do not attempt a close analysis of her playing style.

Practitioners have gone further in this regard, uncovering and assessing some of the particulars of Minnie’s playing. Woody Mann’s published tablature compilation of fingerstyle blues songs, designed to “enhance the repertoire” of developing guitarists, entitled *Six Early Blues Guitarists* (1997) contains three transcriptions of Memphis Minnie tunes. John Miller includes a lesson on the Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe song ‘Pile Drivin’ Blues’ on his DVD and tablature compilation, * Legendary Country Blues Guitar Duets* (2013). Miller describes the duo as having one of the “most well-worked-out duet sounds in the Country Blues”, and notes their “characteristic division of labor” (p. 5) with Minnie playing lead while Joe played rhythm. The most guitar-centric analysis of Minnie’s style currently available comes from performer and recording artist Del Rey. A published tutorial and tablature compilation entitled *The Blues Guitar Styles of Memphis Minnie* (2014) includes ten transcriptions with a tutorial DVD in which Del Rey elucidates some particulars of Minnie’s right hand technique, chord vocabulary and ensemble interactions, as well as her riff-based approach.

While these scholars and practitioners identify Minnie as an integral figure in popular guitar history, acknowledging both her prodigious talent on the guitar as well as her unique position in regard to gender, the close analysis of her idiotechné and approaches to playing undertaken in this chapter aims to strengthen our knowledge of Memphis Minnie as a guitarist, in addition to supplementing the history of the guitar in the blues.

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61 Davis states that Minnie “played a decisive role as anyone in shaping the sound of the Chicago blues” and her “riffs” had a “toughness and energy” that could be identified with urban life (2003 p. 142). Palmer considers Minnie amongst the ranks of “early blues successes” defining her as a “tough, creative guitarist” (1981 p. 110). Evans discusses her wide-ranging influence on recordings from 1932 through to 1967 (p. 81 and 125). Oliver considers Minnie an “outstanding blues personality” describing her as the “best female blues singer outside the classic idiom” (1971 p. 122). Further he describes her as possessing a “formidable guitar technique” (ibid.) and comments on her “remarkable guitar duets with Kansas Joe” (ibid).
3.1 Memphis Minnie, the Guitar and the Early Blues

Born in Tunica County, Mississippi on 3rd June 1897, Lizzie Douglas was one of 13 children born to Gertrude and Abe Douglas. Known as “Kid” by her family, she took her stage name, Memphis Minnie, around the time of her first recording sessions for Columbia in 1929. Minnie’s parents were sharecroppers, and while she had some education as a young girl, it is unclear how much schooling she completed (Garon 2014). Minnie received her first guitar as a Christmas present from her parents at the age of eight, but there is very little recorded information on how she developed her prodigious playing skills. In her early teens, Minnie began frequently leaving home, drawn to the music scene in Memphis, Tennessee. In a place considered “one of the most important centers” of the early blues (Charters 1977, p.11), Minnie began honing her musical and performative skills amongst the city’s musicians (Garon 2014). She may have been proficient on the banjo and piano, and can be heard on one recording playing the mandolin (‘After While Blues’, Vocalion 1658, 1931) but little evidence of how and when she learned to play those instruments is available.

Similar to Maybelle Carter, Minnie’s earliest exposure to music would likely have been within the home. David Evans notes that “while most blues guitarists have always been men, it is remarkable how many first and second generation bluesmen [...] had mothers and sisters who played the guitar and had some influence on their early musical development in a family setting” (Evans 2001 p. 20). In 1910, approximately 80% of the population in the Mississippi delta region was African-American (Wald 2005, p. 85), and within that community, traditional styles of singing within the home would have included “spirituals, functional songs of work and play [and] narrative folk ballads” (Evans 2002, p. 20). Residents of the Deep South would

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62 Minnie is often thought to have come from Algiers, Louisiana, due to a reference to her ‘home place’ as Algiers in the song ‘Nothing in Rambling’ (Okeh 05670, 1940). However, Paul Garon’s revised research and census data places Memphis Minnie’s family as residents in Tunica County around the time of her birth (2014, p. 36).
63 Garon speculates that Memphis Minnie’s stage name was likely assigned by the Columbia A&R scout who ‘discovered’ her and Kansas Joe McCoy (2014, p. 48).
64 In an article based on an interview with Minnie’s sister, Leadbitter states that Minnie received her first guitar as a Christmas present at age 11 (1970, p. 8).
have heard many iterations of song and dance music at social events, including brass and string bands, solo banjoists or popular fiddle and banjo duos playing instrumental breakdowns (ibid)\textsuperscript{65}.

In an examination of the life and music of the legendary country blues artist Robert Johnson (1911-1938), Elijah Wald explores the cultural and musical canvas of the Deep South at the beginning of the twentieth century. Much of the detail that Wald presents in his study helps elucidate the social and musical climate in which Minnie would have developed, therefore informing our understanding of her undocumented musical development. Wald states that often in previous blues histories, the Deep South at the turn of the century was framed as an “isolated backwater” (2005, p. 100) where developing musicians were only exposed to traditional vernacular and folk music. Yet he effectively argues that during the first few decades of the century, while it was hard to know exactly what musicians were listening to on a daily basis, the region was relatively prosperous in comparison to other areas of the U.S. and had a large migrant population who introduced new musical styles. In the early twentieth century, residents would have been experiencing ragtime, early blues and jazz styles, in addition to popular songs, through the medium of sheet music or phonograph records, or by attending traveling shows featuring live music that crisscrossed the region. By the 1920s, radio was becoming popular in the south, playing everything from mainstream pop, hillbilly, opera and smooth singers (Wald 2005)\textsuperscript{66}. While Minnie’s recorded output predominantly features songs that can be classified as blues (with some reliance on ragtime forms), set-lists from gigs dating from the 1940s show Minnie to be proficient in performing popular songs and rhythm

\textsuperscript{65} Musicians known as ‘songsters’, singers and instrumentalists who gained local reputations, would be heard singing ballads or providing dance music at community events. ‘Musicianeers’ provided musical accompaniment for songsters, or played jigs and reels to provide music at local dances (Oliver 1972, p. 21-22) David Evans makes a further definition between songsters and the term ‘bluesman’. He states that songsters “played a broad variety or song types, such as ragtime popular songs, blues and church songs, while bluesmen concentrated mainly on the blues” (1982, p. 108).

\textsuperscript{66} Much of this information is drawn from Chapter’s 2-5 in Wald (2005). In turn, Wald draws heavily from the data of Samuel Adams’ thesis, Changing Negro Life in the Delta, written in 1941.
and blues hits (Garon 2014). While there are no recorded artefacts of her playing in these styles, this information further attests to Minnie’s diversity as a player and performer.

**Minnie, Memphis and the Travelling Circuit**

As noted, it is thought that Minnie developed much of her skill as a player and performer during her teenage years playing in Memphis, as well as spending time on the travelling circuit. During the first decade of the twentieth century, Memphis had a population of around 150,000 residents and boasted a thriving entertainment centre known as Beale Street. Unlike most areas in the South, the Beale Street district was racially integrated, and drinking, gambling and prostitution establishments were lined side-by-side with entertainment venues (ibid. 2013). Musicians could be heard performing on street-corners and in bars throughout the area, often playing a rural style of blues that would become known as the folk or country blues. Within the theatres and more formal establishments on Beale Street, the music was more typically orientated toward a style that has since become known as the classic blues. While both country and classic blues styles developed largely from the same traditions (dance music, balladry, works songs, field hollers and ragtime rhythms), there were some distinct differences (Titon 1994). The country blues style, heard on the street corners, bars and in less formal venues in Memphis (and throughout the South) was often a flexible, intimate and improvised style, played by itinerant male musicians who were self-accompanied (ibid.). The classic blues was a more structured style of blues, performed almost exclusively by female “blues queens” in theatres or traveling revue shows. Rather than being self-accompanied, these singers were backed by professional piano players, or small jazz combos.\(^{67}\)

\(^{67}\) Around 1908, the first published songs with the words “blues” in their titles began to be heard on vaudeville stages in southern urban areas and for purchase on the sheet music market (Evans 2002, p. 25). Composers such as WC Handy (1873-1958) and Perry Bradford (1893-1970) continued to codify and popularise the classic blues style during the teens with published songs ‘Memphis Blues’ (1912) and ‘St Louis Blues’ (1914). The recorded blues became popular in 1920, and the subsequent success of the genre was largely propelled by charismatic and talented female singers and entertainers such Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, who “dominated the stage and recorded performances of the blues” (Harrison 1990, p. 6). While the female stars were the face of the genre, presenting as independent, self-assured and dynamic personalities, the industry was dominated in almost every other aspect by men, with few women playing their own instruments or writing their own repertoire.
Blues queens entertained the masses in theatres and saloons such as those on Beale Street in Memphis, but also in tent shows, and cabaret clubs throughout the United States\(^68\).

Unlike most of the female singers during that era, who gained success as classic blues entertainers, Minnie performed in a country blues style. In addition to performing in Memphis, she also travelled on the circuit during her teenage years, starting around 1916, performing with the Ringling Brothers’ Circus, (Leadbitter 1970)\(^69\). Although there is no specific documentation about Minnie’s time as a circus entertainer, a brief exploration of classic blues singer Ma Rainey’s tenure with Tolliver’s Circus and Musical Extravaganza from 1914-16 informs our understanding of Minnie’s experience\(^70\). In an informative thesis on the life of Rainey, one of the most commercially successful classic blues singers, Sandra Leib elucidates the role of blues performers in the circus:

In an effort to squeeze the last dollar from the public, the management would put on what they called “The After Show” (for which extra was charged). The band would come out and give a musical entertainment, and it was more than possible that it was here that our singers were featured (Leib, 1978, p. 21 quoting Stewart-Baxter)\(^71\).

David Evans corroborates that blues singer-guitarists often performed on the circuit as “filler acts” (2000, p. 84). While it is unclear what exactly Minnie’s role in the circus was, or

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\(^{68}\) Organizations such as such the ‘Theatre Owners Booking Association’ (established in 1909 in Memphis) created a network of venues from Illinois to Louisiana and across to Georgia, establishing a touring circuit on which African-American blues singers were able to perform. ‘Blues queens’ gained significant reputations on the national circuit during the teens and 1920s, performing for black and and white audiences (Leib 1978, p. 22).

\(^{69}\) The circus was another common performance opportunity for many early blues artists, and according to Sandra Leib, the Theatre Owners Booking Association “included a wide variety of entertainment - comedy, circus acts, and pure Vaudeville hokum as well as singing and dancing” (1978, p. 50).

\(^{70}\) Rainey performed with her husband and musical partner, Pa Rainey, billing themselves as the ‘Assassinators of the Blues’ (Leib 1978, p. 21).

\(^{71}\) Ma Rainey later toured the circuit with Thomas Dorsey as her pianist and bandleader in 1924, which attests to the caliber of not only the singers but also the instrumentalists that performed on the same ‘circuit’ that Minnie would have (Leib 1978, p. 22).
what specific repertoire she was performing, Mike Leadbitter (1970) confirms that this is where Minnie began to hone her performance skills, which were clearly substantial, contributing to her great success in the Chicago club scene during the 1930s. It is likely that Minnie would have been influenced by the performance styles of the classic blues singers that she encountered in the Memphis theatres and on the touring circuit, and whilst vital to contextualize Minnie amongst her closest female contemporaries, it is also important to note her singularity72. While female singers dominated the classic blues genre, the country blues genre, in which Minnie excelled, was an almost-exclusively male domain. Her position as a commercially successful female country blues singer and lead guitarist made her an exceptional figure during this era.

The Guitar in the Blues

Although the guitar had not been widely popular within the African-American community in the rural South prior to the turn of the twentieth century (the banjo being the more popular instrument), Evans describes how around 1900 the guitar was suddenly “everywhere […], especially in black music and especially in the Deep South, in string bands and in newly emerging genres of ragtime, jazz and blues” (2001, p.13). With its increased volume and sustain capabilities, expanded melodic range compared to the five string banjo, and a lack of negative cultural connotations that the banjo held for many African-American musicians, the guitar soon became the instrument of choice for many players (ibid.). The guitar flourished within the community of self-accompanied, itinerant blues musicians and was utilized by pioneers of the genre such as Lead Belly (b.1889-1941) and Charley Patton (b.1891-

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72 During the time that Minnie was forming her performance persona, women such as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey were some of the most important female performers in the United States. Through their influence on the musicianship, showmanship and artistry of other artists, these women significantly shaped American music. While in many popular music histories, the inception and popularity of the blues is attributed to male country singers, these powerful women are often-ignored instigators of this highly influential genre. Harrison states that through their “increased improvisation on melodic lines, unusual phrasing which altered the emphasis and impact of the lyrics, and vocal dramatics using shouts, groans, moans and wails”, these blues women deeply influenced changes in later styles of popular music including “jazz, Broadway musicals, torch songs of the 1930s and 1940s, gospel, rhythm and blues and eventually rock and roll” (1990, p. 8). For further discussion of the often-overlooked position of these women, see Davis (1988), chapter 1.
1934). As a contemporary of these players, a brief review of their developmental experiences can help shed further light on the sparsely documented development of Minnie’s musicianship. According to David Evans, Lead Belly and Charlie Patton (born in Louisiana and Mississippi respectively) learned their guitar skills from neighbours and relatives, a typical mode of learning for many blues musicians (2002). They were soon honing their playing and performing skills on street corners and storefronts, at country-dances, outdoor picnics, house parties, juke joints, and barrel-houses. As with many vernacular traditions, players learned their repertoire and techniques from observing other musicians, and developed ensemble skills by playing in duos and groups, constructing a varied repertoire that was tailored to suit the demands of their audiences (Titon 2002). Lavere (1973) describes Minnie performing at local community events soon after learning to play the guitar, and both Garon (2014) and Leadbetter (1970) describe Minnie running away from home, making a living on Memphis’ Beale Street, already an accomplished guitar player by the time she was a young teen.

When Minnie started recording in 1929, the guitar had already been a feature of blues records for a number of years. David Evans identifies a small number of female classic blues records with guitar accompaniment made in the early 1920s (2002). During this same period, the very earliest recordings of what became known as folk or country blues were released. In 1923, Sylvester Weaver recorded a solo guitar blues record for Okeh, entitled ‘Guitar Blues’ (Okeh 8109-A). While the record features no vocals, it demonstrates many of the hallmarks of blues guitar accompaniment, with Weaver playing in an open tuning with a slide, and functioning within in a loose twelve-bar blues form (Titon 1994). At the same session Weaver also recorded ‘Guitar Rag’ (Okeh 8109-B), which features him playing an alternating-bass pattern underneath a melodic line played on the slide, again in a twelve-bar blues form. By 1924, musicians such as Papa Charlie Jackson and Hezekiah Jenkins were also recording self-

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73 This is supported by both Evans and Titon (1994).
74 Guitarist Sylvester Weaver accompanied classic blues star Sara Martin on a recording in 1923 (Okeh 8136 and 8146). In 1924, Ida Cox, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith all recorded songs with guitar accompaniment, marketed under the classic blues label.
accompanied ‘proto-country’ blues records. However, in 1926 a blind singer and guitar player, known as Blind Lemon Jefferson “broke open the recording field for male self-accompanied solo blues singers” (Evans 2002, p. 28).

Over the next five years the demand for recordings by guitar-playing blues singers grew. These performers represented a new direction in musical style, and were less expensive to record in comparison to a female classic blues singer and her accompanying band. Artists such as Son House and Charley Patton began to gain significant fame within the genre, and as its popularity developed, distinct regional styles began to emerge (Evans 2002). These styles were often defined by geographic boundaries, with the three primary regions being East Texas, the Deep South/Mississippi Delta and Piedmont (Cohen 1996). East Texas style guitarists played steady bass notes with the thumb of the right hand (often a muffled bass or a cluster of bass notes) and free flowing improvised melodic lines on the treble strings, typically in response to the vocal line. The Deep South/Mississippi Delta style of blues was typically highly emotive, with the guitar being riff-based and percussive with frequent use of a slide. The harmonic profile of songs was typically simplistic with pentatonic melodies prevalent, and singers often relied on a shared body of lyrics (ibid). The Piedmont style was more heavily influenced by popular song, European folk and ragtime music. In the Piedmont region, guitarists typically played straight patterns of alternating bass notes with the thumb and intricate syncopated melodies on the treble strings with their fingers. There was less use of call and response, but often a more consistent, and complex accompaniment. Texturally and harmonically the

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75 As a Paramount recording artist, Jefferson’s records sold widely and he effectively set the model for the commercial success of the subsequent folk blues recording market. While many of the recordings by Jefferson’s predecessors bear the hallmarks of popular song and ragtime characteristics, Blind Lemon Jefferson “unambiguously represented the solo blues sound of the street corner, the house party, the southern country picnic, and the honkytonk, and he did so with extraordinary virtuosity as a lyricist, vocalist and guitarist” (Evans, 2000, p. 87). Although Jefferson “represented something new to the recording industry - yet something old in respect to the blues tradition [...] the record industry could have found no better candidate to demonstrate almost the full range of possibilities of solo guitar-accompanied blues at that time” (ibid., p. 88). Jefferson’s characteristic style included “elaborate blues melodies in a vocal range that stretched to two octaves and playing extended single note runs on the guitar, displaying a seemingly inexhaustible supply of improvisational ideas performed with amazing virtuosity” (Evans 2002, p. 28-29).
Piedmont approach was dense and adherent to a more strict 12 bar blues format, but with frequent harmonic changes, and passing tones (ibid).

In each region the guitar was used in varying degrees of accompaniment and almost always played in a fingerstyle fashion rather than flatpicked, although players would sometimes use finger picks on the right hand (ibid.)76. Minnie’s style, as will be shown later in this chapter, is most closely associated with the Delta style.

Popular blues recordings from this period frequently featured the guitar in ensemble, and in particular, the guitar duo format was a popular combination in Memphis77. According to Cohn, the Memphis guitar duo format typically featured one guitarist playing “treble figures while the other played basslines” (1993, p. 61) and much of Minnie’s early guitar duo work adheres to this description. The string band was another popular combo in the South, integrating the guitar with the fiddle and banjo78. The guitar was also frequently paired with the piano, with the guitar playing either accompaniment or lead (Epstein 1969). Another popular ensemble, originally developed in Louisville, Kentucky around the turn of the century, was the jug band. Initially a novelty genre that became immensely popular in the blues scene of the South, these ensembles featured a string band supporting a liquor jug or bottle player, who functioned in a lead melodic role (Cohn 1993). Minnie recorded sides in all the above formats, and the diversity of her stylistic ability attests to her capability and versatility as a musician. Upon an aural examination of her catalogue, it is clear that Minnie was a formidable ensemble player, able to easily negotiate the various musical requirements of these diverse performance situations.

While Minnie may have been the only woman of her era to gain significant commercial success in the country blues (in addition to boasting a large roster of writing credits), she was

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76 This section draws heavily from Evans (2002), p. 30-31. Credit must be given to his exceptional and meticulous research in this area.
77 The Beale Street Sheiks (Frank Stokes and Dan Sane) were a popular Memphis guitar duo, that according to Garon, likely influenced and inspired Memphis Minnie (2014, p. 42).
78 The Mississippi Sheiks were a popular ensemble recording in the region in the late 1920s (Cohn 1993, p. 48-49).
not the only woman to be heard on record playing the guitar. One of the few women heard playing guitar on blues records before Minnie was Lulu Jackson, who recorded a number of songs in 1928, singing and accompanying herself on the instrument. Although her sides ‘Careless Love Blues’ and ‘You’re Going to Leave the Old Home, Jim’ (Vocalion 1193, 1928) were released on Vocalion’s Race records series, in character they can only be broadly defined as blues records. After Minnie’s initial recording success in 1929, the industry responded by releasing a small flurry of recordings by female blues singer-guitarists. Mattie Delaney recorded two sides for Vocalion in 1930 called ‘Down the Big Road Blues’ and ‘Tallahatchie Blues’ (Vocalion 1480), and an outstanding example of a female blues guitar duo on record from that same year is the haunting ‘Last Kind Word Blues’ recorded by Geeshie Willey and Elvie Thomas for Paramount (Paramount 12951).

While it is heartening to find at least a handful of titles that feature other women playing guitar on blues records in the late 1920s and early 1930s, their output was undeniably small. As previously noted, none of these women demonstrate a similar commercial output as Minnie, and none demonstrate guitar skills on record as advanced as Minnie’s at the time. As addressed in the previous chapter, undoubtedly many women encountered social stereotypes that governed how and where women could play the guitar, limiting the avenues that a woman’s career could take in the 1920s and thirties. Alan Lomax, the tireless ethnomusicologist responsible for unearthing much of the authentic traditions of the blues of the South, attested to the issues of gender marginalisation facing women in the blues tradition.

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79 According to Wald, the only blueswoman who recorded more sides than Minnie during her career was Bessie Smith, who of course recorded in the classic blues genre. (2005 p. 41).
80 A poignant example of this is Elizabeth ‘Libba’ Cotten (1895-1987), a remarkable singer and guitar player from North Carolina. Cotten had a unique approach to playing the guitar upside down, and is credited with writing some of the standards of the fingerstyle blues repertoire, including the song ‘Freight Train’, which she wrote as a young girl. Cotten was not discovered until the late 1950s, almost by a stroke of fate. She, like many of her peers, went into the domestic profession at the age of twelve, and was employed during the 1940s by the Seeger family, a dynasty of American musicians, composers, historians and folk music collectors. Mike Seeger, a figure associated with Maybelle Carter in the previous chapter, recorded Cotten after discovering her incredible talent, and she went on to have a relatively prolific recording and touring career during the late 1950s, influencing generations of subsequent guitar players (Seeger 1989). The example of Libba Cotten attests to the intersectional issues faced by many female musicians – obstacles of gender, race and class standing as impediments to the career development of musical women.
In his book, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (1993) Lomax comments on the “short list of women” that publicly performed the folk blues, noting that few women “risk playing a guitar before an audience” (p. 360), citing cultural and social norms, and even religious beliefs. Nevertheless, in spite of these impediments, Memphis Minnie was able to gain significant commercial success as a singer and guitar player, along with amassing numerous writing credits, in an era that saw no other women able to achieve similar gains (Charters 1997).

### 3.2 Overview of Minnie’s Recording Career and Physical Playing Style

An analysis of Memphis Minnie’s recorded output from the years 1929-1953 exposes a recording career that can be broken down into three distinct phases, which for the purpose of this study will be defined as her early, middle and late periods:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Number of Sides Released</th>
<th>Primary Output</th>
<th>Primary Musical Collaborator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early Period (1929-1934)</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>Guitar Duos</td>
<td>Kansas Joe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-Period (1935-1938)</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Combos</td>
<td>Various</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late-Period (1939-1953)</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Guitar Duos with Rhythm Section</td>
<td>Little Son Joe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.1 Overview of Memphis Minnie’s recorded output (1929-1953).

Between 1929-1934 Minnie primarily recorded country blues guitar duets with Wilbur “Kansas Joe” McCoy (1905-1950), her musical partner and husband at the time. McCoy was an experienced musician, singer, guitarist and composer who was born in Mississippi in 1905 and had developed versatile performance skills playing with his brother, Charlie McCoy and members of the Chatmon family, who later went on to form the influential country blues string band, the Mississippi Sheiks. Minnie and McCoy had begun playing together in

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81 Lomax (1993) states that African-American religious folk believed all lute-like instruments, the guitar in particular, were “the devil's own riding horses”.

82 This analysis has been guided by the discographical information compiled by Garon (2014).

83 See Garon (2014), Charters (1977, chapter 6) and Oliver (1972) for further information about Kansas Joe and the Chatmon family.
Memphis sometime during the 1920s and were discovered by a Columbia record scout “playing in a Beale Street barbershop for dimes” (Garon 2014, p. 46).

As can be seen in figure 3.2, during her early recording period, Minnie played guitar on 91 issued sides, the majority of which were recorded in guitar duo format, with Kansas Joe. As previously stated, Minnie played lead in their collaborations while Joe played rhythm, with the pair switching vocal duties for many of the sides. Two sides recorded by the duo in 1931 were purely instrumental and one features Minnie playing lead on a mandolin. According to Paul Oliver the recordings made with Kansas Joe in this early period “were among her best” (1972, p. 122).

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84 This data reflects all of the sides recorded and issued during this period. There were a handful of sides recorded by Minnie during this period that were unissued by her record companies and while they have been assessed (where possible) for the purpose of this study, and are fine representatives of Minnie’s style, those sides are not included in this data. Similarly, a handful of recordings in this data are no longer commercially available, therefore have not been assessed. Due, to the consistency of Minnie’s playing approach across her recording career, is it felt that the missing sides are also likely representative of Minnie’s identified idiotechne. See Garon’s discography (2014, p. 317-347) for complete information on unissued sides.

85 See the discography in Garon (2014) for complete breakdown of vocal duties.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recording Date</th>
<th>Guitar Duo</th>
<th>Guitar Duo (Instrumental)</th>
<th>Guitar &amp; Mandolin Duo</th>
<th>Solo</th>
<th>Jug Band</th>
<th>3 Guitars &amp; Piano</th>
<th>Record Label</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jun-29</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Columbia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb-30</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vocalion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May-30</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Victor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May-30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Victor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun-30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vocalion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul-30</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vocalion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep-30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vocalion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct-30</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vocalion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan-31</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vocalion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb-31</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vocalion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar-31</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vocalion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb-32</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Vocalion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov-33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Okeh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar-34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vocalion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug-34</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Decca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep-34</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Decca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>73</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>91</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total Recordings: June 29 - Sept 34**

Figure 3.2 Overview of Memphis Minnie's recorded output during her Early period (1929-1934).

Additionally, as seen in figure 3.2, during this time Minnie recorded four sides in a jug band format, two sides with three guitars and a piano (featuring Kansas Joe, Tampa Red and Georgia Tom) and nine self-accompanied fingerstyle blues songs. Minnie’s versatility as an ensemble player is clear during this early period and importantly, her varied experience foreshadowed the middle period of her career, in which the vast majority of her sides were recorded in a variety of combo formats.
Figure 3.3  Overview of Memphis Minnie’s recorded output during her Middle period (1935-1938).
In early 1930, Minnie and Kansas Joe moved to Chicago, (Garon 2014) but for reasons that are unclear, the pair separated professionally and personally after their last recording session in 1934. In 1935, Minnie embarked on a period in which she recorded 62 sides, turning away from the guitar duo format. Although she recorded three guitar duos under the name “Texas Tessie”, accompanied by Big Bill Broonzy (Garon 2014), and four solo fingerstyle blues sides in 1935, the remainder of her output during her middle period features her playing guitar in a variety of combos. This demonstrates Minnie “modernizing her style” (Cohn 1993, p.68), following the trend in the race records industry towards an urban style of blues with an emphasis on “new combos […] that included piano as well as string bass and often one or two brass or reed instruments” (ibid). As seen in figure 3.3, Minnie recorded in a wide variety of combo formats during this period, and worked with numerous musicians under influential producer and manager Lester Melrose (Garon 2014). While Minnie can be heard comping on some of these records, she continues to play lead guitar breaks on a majority of the sides.

According to Leadbitter (1970), in 1939 Minnie began collaborating with guitarist Ernest Lawlars (1900-1960). In addition to playing together, the pair were romantically involved, and eventually married. Minnie and Lawlars, who recorded under the name Little Son Joe, first recorded together in February 1939 and continued to record until 1953.

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86 According to both Leadbitter and Garon, one possible reason for the break-up of the duo was a sense of jealousy on the part of Joe, due to his wife's great commercial success. For further discussion see Garon (2014, p.60) and Leadbitter (1970, p. 9).

87 Titon describes the turn toward urbanisation or a “city influence” in the 1930s, characterized by “small instrumental groups, instead of soloists accompanying themselves [and] songs which reflected urban concerns” (1994, p. 51). Additionally he identifies accompaniment techniques employing numerous chord changes and substitutions in a still-recognizable blues form, as well as more precise diction, rather than raspy vocal styles, and more lyrical references to humour and sex. (ibid).
**Figure 3.4** Overview of Memphis Minnie’s recorded output during her Late period (1935-1953).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recording Date</th>
<th>Guitar Duo</th>
<th>2 Guitars and Drums</th>
<th>2 Guitars and Bass</th>
<th>2 Guitars, Bass, Drums and Piano</th>
<th>2 Guitars, Piano, Bass and Vocal Chorus</th>
<th>Guitar, Piano, Bass and Drums</th>
<th>2 Guitar, Piano, Harmonica and Drums</th>
<th>2 Guitar, Piano and Drums</th>
<th>Record Label</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feb-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vocalion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun-40</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Okeh/Conquerer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May-41</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Okeh/Conquerer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec-41</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Okeh/Columbia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec-44</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Okeh Columbia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb-46</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Columbia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep-46</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Columbia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec-47</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Columbia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr-49</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Columbia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan-50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Regal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul-52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Checker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct-53</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>J.O.B.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total Recordings between Feb 39-Oct 53**: 59
As seen in figure 3.4, Minnie recorded 59 sides during her late period, returning to the guitar duo format in which she had originally gained commercial success. In an effort to stay current, all but six of the duo’s sides from this late period feature a rhythm section of some sort. Minnie continued to assume the dominant role of lead guitarist during this period, as she had throughout her earlier career. At times Little Son Joe was billed as ‘Mr Memphis Minnie’, and on some records was only given a playing credit, attesting to Minnie’s popularity and agency within the industry at the time. Despite the success of some of her early hits, Garon considers this period the “most fruitful” of her recording career (Garon 2014, p. 73).

Through each of these identified periods, Minnie demonstrates remarkable versatility as a recording artist, ensemble member, songwriter and singer, as well as a consistently impressive command of her instrument. Unlike Maybelle Carter who developed what at the time was a unique approach, Minnie’s idiotechne can be considered consistent with that of many of her contemporaries. Blues scholar David Evans identifies the sonic norms of the early blues, including “the use of ‘blue notes’ or flexible pitch areas at certain points on the scale”, in addition to using the instrument as a voice, “often responding to and punctuating the singing voice rather than merely providing rhythmic and harmonic background” (2001, p. 22). Evans also identifies “the use of ‘riffs’ or repeated short melodic/rhythmic phrases” as well as a “forceful, percussive approach to sound production” as normative within the style (ibid). In his study of tradition and creativity in the folk blues, Evans identifies some additional recurrent characteristics of blues accompaniments, including the use of syncopation, “improvisational variations from one stanza to another” and the use of “several strains or ‘parts’ in the same piece” (1982, p. 25). Evans also identifies a number of somatic norms associated with country blues guitar playing, including the use of open chord or modal tunings that exploit the sound of open strings, achieving blue notes by string bending or the use of a slide and using only one or two fingers in the left hand for fretting or chording (2001 p. 23).
Evans also identifies the guitaristic tendency to “hammer” on strings, in addition to the juxtapositional use of “clear” and “dirty tones” (1982, p. 26).

When collating Evans’ assessments, one can compile the following expected list of stylistic norms demonstrated by many early blues guitar players:

![Stylistic Norms in Early Blues Guitar Playing (Evans 1982 & 2001)](image)

Through an analysis of Minnie’s recorded output, it is clear that she engages with many expected stylistic norms across her entire catalogue, therefore identifying her as a central representative of early blues guitar practitioners, a contemporary amongst players of her era.
In addition to incorporating most of the above-mentioned norms, close analysis of Minnie’s playing identifies a number of unique or identifying facets, allowing us to closely define her idiotechne. Those include a harmonically driven approach to lead-line construction, the use of seed and master riffs, and a consistent engagement with call and response.

Before engaging upon a close analysis of Minnie’s idiotechne, a brief discussion of her physical playing style is necessary. In the previous chapter on Maybelle Carter, the analysis of physical approach was aided in part by a review of video footage, in addition to practitioner-led research. Sadly, there is no available video footage of Memphis Minnie to draw upon in order to assess the physicality of her playing. In the late 1950s, Minnie and Little Son Joe left Chicago for Memphis, due to Joe’s ill-health (Garon 2104), and in 1960 Minnie suffered a stroke, leaving her unable to play. Therefore, in the time when many early blues musicians where being re-discovered during the folk music revival, Minnie was no longer able to perform, which likely explains the complete lack of video footage.

However, Del Rey (2014) asserts that Minnie favoured playing with fingerpicks and similarly Calt (1988) remarks, “though fingerpicking [Minnie] plays with the speed and finesse of a flatpicker”. Cohen (1996) offers a general description of the right-hand approaches taken by blues guitarists, which is applicable to Minnie. Of the 94 players that Cohen analysed, he
found “all but a few used the right thumb to play bass notes, while the right hand index finger responded in some way with treble notes. Of the guitarists who differed from that description, only a few used more than one finger to play the treble line” (p. 457-8). Similarly, Minnie’s left hand approach is ultimately speculative, but likely she used her 1st, 2nd and 3rd fingers of her left hand to fret melody lines (considering the intricacy of some of her leads) and at times, her thumb to fret certain bass notes.

According to Garon (2014), Minnie played a national steel-bodied resonator guitar in her early career, an instrument designed for its ability to produce a heightened volume in relation to a tradition wood construction acoustic guitar. As will be discussed later, throughout her catalogue, Minnie can be heard transitioning from acoustic steel bodies, to amplified acoustic guitars in the early 1940s and then electric guitars in her late career period. On her early period recordings, when playing acoustic, Minnie features a consistently bright tone, with little variation. The records on which she plays an amplified guitar in the 40s feature her with a clean, relatively warm tone, using tonal and dynamic nuances for interest. Garon documents one of Minnie’s students, Brewer Phillips, as describing her playing a hollow-bodied Gibson guitar at this time, but which model is unknown. Also, Minnie can be seen in pictures playing a National New Yorker guitar. On sides recorded in the late 1940’s on which Minnie plays electric, she uses a variety of tone, at times bright, and on other records using a warmer tone (perhaps through use of neck and bridge pick-ups), as well as experimenting with distortion. As will be discussed later in the chapter, one of the idiotechniques, or identifying facets of Minnie’s idiotechne, was a creative engagement with tone, in particular the use of cross-strung melodic tones, a device which allowed for a variety of colours, even when playing a simple melodic gestures.
3.3 Minnie as a Rhythm Player

While the majority of Minnie’s recordings during her early and late period feature her as a lead player, a brief discussion of her comping style, which can be heard on a number of combo recordings from her middle period, is of benefit\(^{88}\).

Figure 3.7  Memphis Minnie ‘Hot Stuff (Take 2)’ (Vocalion 03651, 1937). Chord progression.

Where Minnie’s comping patterns can be heard, her approach can be considered traditional, mainly playing squarely on the beat with tight down-strums in the right hand. A representative example of this approach can be heard on her 1937 recording of ‘Hot Stuff (Take 2)’ (Vocalion 03651), on which she is playing in a combo with trumpet, piano and drums. As seen in figure 3.7, the song follows a traditional 12-bar blues form, and it is likely that Minnie is playing her G chord as a barre, or in the traditional blues approach of playing with the thumb up-and-over the neck, fretting the root of the chord note on the 6th string, muting the 5\(^{th}\) string with the end of the thumb, and then fretting the 4-1\(^{st}\) strings with fingers 1-3 (leaving the 4\(^{th}\) finger of the left hand free to plays riffs around the chord if necessary).

\(^{88}\) On many recordings where she can be heard comping, it can be difficult to hear her acoustic guitar clearly, often in combo with a piano, due to the lo-fidelity of recordings from the mid to late 1930s (in addition to the dynamic balance between the two instruments).
Minnie’s D7 and C7 were either played from 5th string root barre shapes, or from the C7 shape in first and 3rd positions, as can be seen in figure 3.8;

![G, C7, D7 chord shapes](image)

Figure 3.8 Memphis Minnie’s chord shapes used on ‘Hot Stuff (Take 2)’ (Vocalion 03651, 1937).

These chosen shapes, common within the blues vernacular, allowed Minnie to play with a ‘choke’ style in the left hand, muting the chord by slightly lifting the left hand fingers immediately after the chord is struck in the right hand, resulting in a percussive and driving style of accompaniment.

While engagement with the standard or modified 12-bars blues form, as seen in ‘Hot Stuff (Take 2)’ can be considered an overwhelmingly recurrent feature of Minnie’s recordings, a number of songs feature her using slightly more complex forms, especially those drawn from the ragtime tradition.

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89 Evans notes that ragtime material can “be heard in the recordings of many ‘blues’ guitarists in the 1920s and later” (2001, p. 19).
The song ‘Selling My Pork Chops’ (Bluebird B-6199, 1935), recorded with a piano and bass player in 1935, demonstrates Minnie working from a ragtime progression. Minnie again demonstrates a tight-four comping style, easily navigating the changes in the left hand. Again, these changes, as seen in figure 3.9, are likely played using traditional first position open-chord shapes, using a choked style. There are a number of instances of stop-time bars during the final chorus, which she smoothly negotiates.

On the song ‘I’m Waiting on You’ (Bluebird B-6141, 1935), a guitar duet recorded with Big Bill Broonzy in 1935 (recorded under the stage name ‘Texas Tessie’), Minnie plays a straight comping pattern during the verse, chorus and bridge sections, again based on a modified ragtime form;
As can be seen in figure 3.10, particularly noticeable here is Minnie’s choice of chord voicings during the chorus and bridge sections. Using an open C chord voicing, with the 5<sup>th</sup> of the chord fretted on the first string at the start of the chorus, Minnie creates a chromatic counter-melody on the first string (annotated in red), which connects the top voice of chords during the changes in the section, with a similar approach taken in the bridge. During Broonzy’s lead solo (track time 1:05), Minnie comps more rhythmically, syncopating her strumming pattern, in addition to adding some chromatic chord shifts.

While Minnie assumes the role of rhythm guitarist on only a handful of her recordings, her approach to comping, as seen in these examples, can be considered both effective and efficient.
3.4 Minnie as a Lead Player

On the vast majority of the over 200 sides that Minnie recorded throughout her career, with a variety of musical partners and combo settings, Minnie assumed the role of lead guitarist. Through close analysis of her catalogue, it is evident that her lead lines were fundamentally constructed by “mapping” around underlying chord structures; that is, the pitch content of her solos can be related to physical chord shapes on the neck. So while her leads are linear and melodic, a physical chord shape, associated with the underlying harmony of a bar, is typically driving the melodic content. This approach intersects with Kernfeld’s (1981) concept of formulaic improvisation, which he defines as a “melodic response to a particular harmony or structural context” (1981, p. 17). Kernfeld states that a formulaic improvisation often “recurs amongst several improvisations” (ibid.), which is also consistent within Minnie’s approach. Said recurrent improvisations shall be defined here as ‘master riffs’ and ‘master gestures’. Additionally, this approach can be considered affordant, using fundamental chord shapes in the left hand that allow accessibility to melodic pitch material.

It is probable that that Minnie’s lead playing style was derived initially from the traditional blues fingerstyle approach of playing bass lines and melody simultaneously in order to accompany oneself whilst singing. This approach requires a player to construct melodic lines around chord shapes, in order to facilitate the playing of independent lines. Likely the first style that Minnie learned, it seems she subsequently maintained her initial fretboard conceptualization of linking melodic material to chord areas then transferred it to lead playing, dropping the bass component when the harmonic/rhythm player role was assumed by a musical partner. This hypothesis is supported by the occurrence of similar master riffs and

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90 While it is likely that Minnie’s lead solos were not ‘on the spot’ improvisations in the literal sense, due to what will be seen as the prevalence of similar motives and riffs across her catalogue, here I function from the perspective that all lead solos typically start from an improvisatory standpoint, and then become subsumed into a players recurrent vocabulary.

91 Affordance is the concept that the parameters of an object offer a suggested approach to using that object (Gibson 1986).

92 Minnie can heard playing in this style on recordings from 1933-1935, and her playing on those records will be analysed later in this chapter.
gestures heard on both her solo and duo sides. This approach can be identified in her earliest recordings, as on the song ‘When the Levee Breaks’ (Columbia 14439-D) recorded by Minnie and Kansas Joe in 1929 at their first recording session. The song features Minnie and Joe playing in a guitar duo format, with Minnie playing lead while Kansas Joe plays rhythm and sings. The song is played in 4/4, with nine sung verses in a typical 12-bar form, each with an AAB lyric structure, with the verses adhering to what is considered the typical I, IV, V blues harmonic structure. The song begins at a tempo of around 173bpm and gradually increases over the course of the song, ending around 200bpm. Sounding between the keys of A and Bb major, it is likely that Joe played in standard tuning (tuned slightly sharp), using open-chord shapes in first position while Minnie played in open G major tuning or ‘Spanish’ tuning, with a capo at the second fret. In Spanish, a tuning frequently used by blues players, the main I, IV and V chord shapes are located on the neck as follows:

![G] ![G] ![G] ![C] ![D]

Figure 3.11 Common I, IV and V chord shapes/harmonic areas in Spanish tuning.

93 A further hypothesis is that especially on her early period recordings, Minnie may have been playing bass and treble lines simultaneously, although her basslines cannot be heard as they were over-powered in the recording mix. This cannot be confirmed, but is a strong speculation.

94 The lyrics of the topical song speak of the devastating Mississippi River flood of 1927, an event considered one of the worst natural disasters in the history of the United States. The flood killed up to 1000 people and devastated many communities, inspiring songs by a number of blues artists at the time, including Blind Lemon Jefferson, Lonnie Johnson and Bessie Smith. For further information see Evans (2006).

95 This song closely follows that which David Evans considers a typical “basic pattern” of the blues form (1982, p. 23). While this song follows the fundamental form, many of Minnie’s songs frequently deviate. Especially within solo songs, beats or even bars may be added or subtracted. However, in the context of a duo, adhering to a pre-determined form would, of course, have been beneficial.

96 Evans considers the gradual acceleration of tempo another typical characteristic of many blues songs. (1982, p. 31).

97 In Spanish tuning, from low to high, the guitar strings are tuned DGDGBD, voicing a G major chord across the open strings.
Figure 3.12 shows a transcription of Minnie’s lead line for the opening solo of ‘When the Levee Breaks’, in which she constructs, or maps, her lead line around the chord shapes associated with the harmony of a given bar,

**Tuning: Spanish in G, capo at fret 2**
Figure 3.12  Kansas Joe and Memphis Minnie ‘When the Levee Breaks’ (Columbia 14439-D, 1929. Track time 0:00-0:25). Opening solo, annotated to show melodic mapping.

As can be seen in figure 3.12, all of Minnie’s melodic material for the solo is mapped around underlying I, IV and V chord shapes, with all notes physically accessible within range of the chord shape. So although Minnie is playing single-line melodic lead (able to do so because Joe is playing rhythm), it is clear that she is conceptualising, and then mapping over harmonic areas. Additionally, Minnie’s lead part shows her engagement with many of the expected stylistic norms of the country blues including pentatonicism⁹⁸, syncopation and somatic gestures such as bends (bars 9, 11, and 14) and the varied use of tone (such as the choice of cross-string placement of the ^b3 played on the 3rd string, followed by the natural ^3 played on the 2nd string).

When assessing Minnie’s recorded catalogue of duos from her early period with Kansas Joe, 18 out of 66 songs were played in Spanish tuning, and it is clear that her approach to constructing lead lines consistently follows the method as outlined above. The song ‘She Wouldn't Give Me None’ (Vocalion 1576) recorded in 1930, features Minnie playing in Spanish tuning, capoed at the 6th fret (resulting in the sounding key of Db major). Similar to ‘When the Levee Breaks’, this song is based on a 12-bar blues form, and in comparison, variants of the same melodic material can be identified in both solos, primarily due to both solos being mapped around similar chord shapes areas;

⁹⁸ The first three phrases (bars 1-6) are diatonic, yet in the fourth phrase she introduces the ^b3 in bar 6, signalling a turn toward an incorporation of pentatonicism. The rest of the solo subsequently vacillates between diatonic and pentatonic material.
Figure 3.13  Kansas Joe and Memphis Minnie ‘She Wouldn't Give Me None’ (Vocalion 1576, 1930. Track time 0:00 – 0:18). Opening solo in Spanish tuning, annotated to show melodic mapping.
Immediately recognizable in the song ‘She Wouldn’t Give Me None’ is a motive constructed over the I chord area during bars 1-4 (figure 3.13), which is then sequenced over the IV chord area in bars 5-6, then repeated over the I chord area in bar 7-8. Although rhythmically varied, this melodic sequence is inherently similar to that heard in the ‘When the Levee Breaks’ solo, bars 9-16 (figure 3.12). Additionally, material played over the V chord areas in both solos is closely related. The concept of ‘song families’ or ‘tune families’ is frequently acknowledge amongst blues scholars, and is defined by Titon as “a number of songs with different texts yet virtually the same accompaniment and melody” (Titon 1971, p. 57). While both the text and vocal melody of ‘When the Levee Breaks’ and ‘She Wouldn’t Give Me None’ are divergent, Minnie accompaniments can be defined as closely related, or as members of the same ‘accompaniment family’.

In contrast, on the song ‘Crazy Cryin’ Blues’ (Vocalion 1678) recorded in 1931, Minnie plays in the same tuning, but crafts new melodic material for her lead solo;
While Minnie’s melodic material during the opening solo of ‘Crazy Cryin’ Blues’ is again mapped around the same chord areas/shapes as in ‘When the Levee Breaks’ and ‘She Wouldn’t Give Me None’, she presents newly composed material for this solo. Crafting a repeated gesture in bar 1-3 around the b3 of the I chord, Minnie asserts a pentatonic feel in the opening bars, whilst Kansas Joe plays a major I chord in his accompaniment, mixing modes at the outset. Additionally, material played over the IV and V chord in bar 5, 6 and 9 can be mapped to the underlying chord shapes. Also of note in this solo is Minnie’s rhythmic approach, which is dominated by semiquavers, played with a straight feel in the first two
phrases. However, in the final phrase of the solo (bar 9), she reverts to a predominantly quaver rhythm which she plays with a swing feel, resulting in a nuanced rhythmic profile of the solo.

The assessment of 18 songs recorded by Minnie in Spanish tuning during her early period all show a similar approach, mapping over common chord areas in order to construct her solos, resulting in an identifiable and relatively predictable lead style when playing in this tuning. Repeated riffs and motives can be heard across the set of songs in Spanish tuning, with many of the solos beginning with I chord area melodic material played in first position, moving up to the 5th position IV chord area, with V chord material almost always based around the first position V chord shape (see figure 3.11). This regional mapping formula results in registral contrast within the solos, in addition to a predictable pathway. For the practitioner, this knowledge aids in transcribing and learning multiple individual solos, and also lends to a sense of familiarity for the listener.

Master Riffs in Spanish Tuning

In addition to developing a unified sound by mapping solos around common chord areas when playing in Spanish tuning, Minnie recycles master riffs or gestures which appear identically across songs, further defining her sound within the given tuning. Minnie frequently uses the riff shown in 3.15 as an embellishing gesture for I chord bars when playing in Spanish tuning, and can be heard during the songs ‘Don't Want No Woman’ (Victor 23313, 1930) and ‘Memphis Minnie-Jitis Blues’ (Vocalion 1588, 1930). This simple gesture, mapped around the I chord, is idiomatic and easy to play on the first string, employing a 3-note slur, pulling-off from a stopped to an open note, effectively colouring a static I chord bar;
Additionally a common master gesture used in Spanish tuning is a melodic leap up to tonic note during the final or penultimate and final bars of a solo. Minnie typically jumps from lower root note, 3rd or 5th degree of the scale up to a re-iterated tonic on the first string (see figure 3.12, bar 20, figure 3.13, bar 11-12 and figure 3.14, bar 11-12). This simple gesture can be heard functioning as an effective ‘sign-off’ riff in almost all of Minnie’s solo played in Spanish tuning.

As has been demonstrated, Minnie’s approach to playing in Spanish tuning was systemic and characterized by the use of harmonically mapped solos and incorporation of master riffs.

Derived from an analysis of 66 songs recorded by Minnie in her early period, the data in figure 3.16 shows that Minnie’s recorded songs in two open tunings and five different keys during this period;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early Period Keys and Tunings</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Major</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish (in G major)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E Major</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G Major</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vestapol (in D major)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Major</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D Major</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>66</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.16  Key and tunings data from 66 early period Memphis Minnie recordings.
While each key and tuning features a different set of common I, IV and V chord shapes, Minnie takes the same approach to constructing solos in all of the above keys, as she did when playing in Spanish tuning, mapping her lead lines around common chord shapes, in addition to employing recurrent master riffs associated with key/chord area.

**Early Period songs in A Major**

As can be seen in figure 3.16, the most common choice of key for Minnie during her early period was that of A major. Figure 3.17 shows Minnie’s frequently used voicings of the I, IV and V7 when playing in this key. While it is noticeable is that she uses a variety of voicing’s for the same chord, these shapes can all be considered traditional within the early blues vernacular;

![Common I, IV and V chord shapes/harmonic areas in A major.](image)

As seen in figure 3.17, Minnie draws on two consistent A major chord shapes when playing in first position; a traditional open A major shape, or what can be considered the first form of an A major. Additionally, Minnie’s commonly utilizes a variant of that form, often referred to as a ‘long A’ shape, which is created by barring the necessary strings at the second fret with the first finger, and then stretching the 3rd or 4th finger to reach an additional root note on the 1st string, at the 5th fret;

![Memphis Minnie's frequently used forms of the A major chord.](image)
As can be seen in figure 3.18, additionally, Minnie’s uses a 3rd version of an A major chord, which can be considered the second form of the chord – that it, the next possible inversion of a triad up the neck after its first form. Further, Minnie also uses multiple versions of her IV chord. In addition to relying on a traditional first form D major shape and variants, she also uses the second form of the chord, played in fifth position;

![Diagram of chord forms](image)

Figure 3.19  Frequently used forms of the D Major chord.

The song ‘I’m Gonna Bake My Biscuits’ (Vocalion 1512), recorded by Minnie and Joe Kansas in 1930, is a representative example of Minnie’s approach to playing lead in the key of A major. She begins her opening solo with material mapped around the second form IV chord (D major), incorporating a C natural on the first string at the 8th fret, that she reaches up to play from 5th position (asserting the \(^b3\) of the key, or b7 of the underlying harmony). Here, Minnie is likely holding the whole chord shape in her left hand, whilst playing the moving line on the first string, with the ghost of the underlying chord heard faintly on the recording during bars 1 and 2;

99 While this use of various ‘forms’ of a chord is fundamental to many popular guitar styles, practitioners refer to it in a number of different ways. Sokolow (2007) discuss the concept within the blues, describing it as the “F-D-A” roadmap system, allowing for three forms of every chord (based on first position F, D A major shapes). In more involved discussions, the concept is often referred to as the CAGED system, allowing for 5 possible forms of each chord along the neck.
As can be seen in figure 3.20, in bars 3-5 of the opening solo, Minnie drops back to first position, mapping round the long A and open E7 shapes, before playing a descending double-stop riff on strings 3 and 2 (arpeggiated) in bar 6. Double-stop gestures can be heard regularly in Minnie’s songs played in Spanish (see figure 3.12, bars 7 and 19), as well as in many of her songs in other keys, therefore can be considered another of her master riffs or gestures. Finally, Minnie culminates this solo with a ‘sign-off’ master riff in bar 8, leaping an octave from the tonic note on the 3rd string, up to the 1st string tonic, a gesture analogous to that heard at the end of the ‘Crazy Cryin’ Blues’ solo (see figure 3.14), but now in a new key.
Figure 3.21  Memphis Minnie ‘New Dirty Dozen’ (Vocalion 1618, 1930. Track time 0:00 – 0:18) Opening Solo in A major with annotation of melodic mapping.

The opening solo from the song ‘New Dirty Dozen’ (Vocalion 1618) recorded by Minnie and Kansas Joe in 1930, is another definitive example of Minnie’s lead approach in the key of A major. As seen in figure 3.21, Minnie maps her solo around familiar chord shapes, with the first two phrases constructed from double-stop gestures that link the second and first form of the A (I) chord on strings and similar to the arpeggiated ‘master gesture’ heard in ‘I’m Gonna Bake My Biscuits’ (figure 3.20). Additionally, she uses material mapped around the long A form in bar 10, culminating in a jump to the tonic on the first string, using a sign-off master riff in bar 11 and 12. Additionally, Minnie adds an embellishing I chord figure at the
end of this sign-off riff, analogous to that heard in Spanish (see figure 3.15), which can now be defined as a ‘master riff’ due to its inter-key recurrence.

Upon assessment of the other songs that Minnie recorded in A major during her early period, regular use of inter- and intra-key master riffs and gestures is apparent. A variant of the ‘b3 riff over a second form of the subdominant chord, as seen in the song ‘I'm Gonna Bake My Biscuits’ (figure 3.20, bars 1-2), can be heard in a number of other A major songs, including ‘Botherin’ That Thing’ (Vocalion 1570, 1930) and ‘You Got To Move’ (Decca 7038, 1934). Embellishing I chord gestures can be heard in the songs ‘What Fault You Find of Me, Part 1’ (Vocalion 1500, 1930), ‘New Dirty Dozen’ (Vocalion 1618, 1930) and ‘Today Today Blues’ (Vocalion 1673, 1931). Descending double-stops into a I chord on strings 2 and 3 can be heard on ‘What Fault You Find Of Me, Part 1’ (Vocalion 1500, 1930) and numerous riffs built around the long A chord can be heard, due to the versatility of the chord shape, in particular the proximity of most scale degrees and chromatic tones in relation to the shape. The songs ‘Georgia Skin Blues’ (Victor 23352, 1930), ‘North Memphis Blues’ (Vocalion 1550, 1930), ‘Let’s Go To Town’ (Vocalion 1660, 1931) ‘Today Today Blues’ (Vocalion 1673, 1931), “Jailhouse Trouble Blues’ (Vocalion 1718, 1932) and ‘Beat It Right’ (Vocalion 1643, 1931) all feature riffs based around this shape.

**Early Period songs in E Major**

As seen in figure 3.16, E Major was another frequent choice of key for Minnie during her early period. Figure 3.22 shows her common chord shapes/areas in that key;
When playing in E major, in addition to incorporating the first form, open E major chord, Minnie frequently maps her solos around a second form E chord, in addition to the traditional and long A chord shapes. She relies on a modified B7 chord shape in first position, oriented to a minor 7 sound. The song ‘Bumble Bee’ (Vocalion 1476) recorded in 1930, well exemplifies a Memphis Minnie solo in E major;
As can be seen in the transcription in figure 3.23, Minnie begins her ‘Bumble Bee’ solo with a re-iterated double-stop gesture derived from her second form E chord, crafting the entire first phrase (bar 1-4) from triplet and swung quaver statements of the gesture, adding slides for interest. The second phrase (bar 5-8) turns to pentatonic material, mapped over an A7 chord in first position. This phrase is constructed almost entirely of bent ^b3s, ^b5s and ^b7s that resolve to diatonic notes on the same or adjacent strings. Many of the bends precede an open note on an adjacent string, with the bend held through the beginning of the next open note, creating a wash of colour. While she uses relatively simple melodic material, Minnie closely engages with sonic and somatic norms in order to craft an effective solo, within the bounds of her personal idiotechne.
After being released in 1930, ‘Bumble Bee’ became a major hit for Minnie and Kansas Joe. Soon after, Columbia Records released a new version of the song that the duo had recorded in the previous year. In order to further capitalise on the popularity of the song, Victor Records and Vocalion contracted Minnie to record three more versions of the song, and each version adheres closely to the same opening solo as seen in figure 3.23. Additionally, other songs recorded in this period can be considered in the same accompaniment family as ‘Bumble Bee’, including ‘Lay My Money Down’ (Vocalion 1665, 1931), a song whose opening solo is closely allied to the ‘Bumble Bee’ opening solo.

While a number of other songs recorded by Minnie and Kansas Joe in the key of E are outside of the ‘Bumble Bee’ accompaniment family, they too incorporate similar gestures including the double-stop riff over a second form E chord, as well as pentatonic bends around the A7 and Bm7 chord shape, as heard on the song ‘Cherry Ball Blues’ (Vocalion 1535, 1930).

Early Period songs in G Major

![Chord Shapes](image)

Figure 3.24 Common I, IV and V chord shapes/harmonic areas in G major.

As seen in figure 3.16, Minnie recorded eight songs in the key of G major during her early period. Sonic identification in G was initially problematic, as much of the material could be easily mapped onto Spanish tuning chord areas (where the strings are tuned to an open G

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100 Paul Garon describes Minnie’s ‘Bumble Bee’ as the song that “made her famous” (1992, p. 155) and the song has also been described as a “blues classic” (Dickerson, 2013, p. 36).

101 The five versions of this song are; ‘Bumble Bee’ (Columbia 14542-D, 1929) ‘Bumble Bee’ (Vocalion 1476, 1930), ‘Bumble Bee Blues’ (with the Memphis Jug Band, Victor V-38599, 1930), ‘Bumble Bee No. 2 (Vocalion 1556, 1930) and ‘New Bumble Bee (Vocalion 1618, 1930).

102 See appendix C, figure C.1 and C.2 transcriptions, for additional examples of two early period Minnie solos in E major on the songs ‘Give It To Me In My Hand (Can I Go Home With You?)’ (Decca 7023, 1934) and ‘Dirt Dauber Blues’ (Vocalion 1638, 1930), with annotation of melodic mapping.
major chord). However, as seen in the previous transcriptions, when playing in Spanish tuning Minnie characteristically played lead material mapped around the IV chord shape associated with the fifth position on the neck, leading to distinct registral contrast between I and IV chord material. However, for songs played in G major standard tuning, Minnie typically mapped I and IV chord material around the G and C7 shape in first position.

A transcription of the opening lead solo for the song ‘Can I Do It For You? Part 1’ (Vocalion 1523, 1930) shown in figure 3.25, exemplifies Minnie’s lead approach in G major standard tuning:

![G and C7 chord shapes with tablature for lead solo](image)

*Figure 3.25  Memphis Minnie ‘Can I Do It For You? Part 1’ (Vocalion 1523, 1930. Track time 0:00-0:15). Opening solo in G major with annotation of melodic mapping.*
As seen in figure 3.25, Minnie maps her solo entirely over first position chord areas, with frequent incorporation of ^b3s and ^b7s. Emphasizing pentatonic scale material over Kansas Joe’s diatonic chord progressions, effectively mixing modes, can be defined as one of the recurrent characteristics of Minnie’s solos when played in the key of G major\textsuperscript{103}. Again, Minnie ends her solo with a master sign-off riff in bars 9-10\textsuperscript{104}.

**Early Period songs in Vestapol, C and D Major**

Referring once more to figure 3.16, during her early period, Minnie also recorded songs in the key of C and D major, as well as Vestapol tuning. While less prolific in these keys and tunings, she approaches them systematically, and effectively. She recorded four songs in Vestapol tuning, another common open tuning used by blues guitarists, characterized by the strings being tuned to an open D major chord\textsuperscript{105}. In this tuning Minnie’s solos are typically mapped over commonly used I, IV and V chords, as seen in figure 3.26;

![Figure 3.26 Common I, IV and V chord shapes/harmonic areas in Vestapol tuning.](image)

During the opening solo of the song’s ‘Never Told a Lie’ (Victor 23313, 1930) and ‘Hard Down Lie’ (Vocalion 1665, 1931), both played in Vestapol, Minnie maps her lead material over the open I chord, as well as the 5\textsuperscript{th} and 7\textsuperscript{th} fret IV and V chords. Similar to when playing in Spanish tuning, the location of these harmonic areas creates a noticeable registral contrast between tonic chord material and sub-dominant/dominant chord material in these solos. However, in the song ‘Somebody’s Got To Help You’ (Vocalion 1653, 1931), Minnie

\textsuperscript{103} It is important to note that these lead lines could all be easily played if or when Minnie was incorporating bass lines. The melodic notes are all able to be played with the 1\textsuperscript{st} or 4\textsuperscript{th} finger in the left hand, whilst holding down the root of the I and IV chord with a 2\textsuperscript{nd} or 3\textsuperscript{rd} finger.

\textsuperscript{104} See appendix C, figure C.3 transcription, for an additional example of an early period Minnie solo in G major on the song ‘Socket Blues’ (Vocalion 1688, 1932), with annotation of melodic mapping.

\textsuperscript{105} In Vestapol tuning, the strings are tuned from low to high DADF#AD, resulting in a D major harmony when playing all strings open.
draws material from a first position V chord, keeping I and V chord material in a common register.

Similarly, on songs in the keys of C and D major, Minnie’s solos are mainly mapped around standard I, IV and V chords. Figure 3.27 shows Minnie’s primary shapes associated with the key of C;

![Figure 3.27 Common I, IV and V chord shapes/harmonic areas in C Major.](image)

Minnie’s solo for the song ‘That Will Be Alright’ (Columbia 14439-D, 1929), played in the key of C major, maps around chords in 1st position only, where as during the song ‘Frisco Town’ (Columbia 14455-D, 1929), Minnie maps part of her opening solo around a second form F chord in 5th position. Additionally, during the song ‘Good Girl Blues’ (Vocalion 1603, 1930) Minnie maps her lead material around the C and G barre chord shapes. Further, she uses descending chromatic double-stop intra-key master riffs in songs in the key of C, often linking the first and second form C major chord areas on the 1st and 2nd string. While Minnie is able to create a strong product in this key, noticeable is the key’s infrequency (4 of 66 analysed songs in total), perhaps due to the less idiomatic application of lead lines around the subdominant F chord shapes.

In contrast, while Minnie recorded only two songs during her early period in the key of D major, ‘Plymouth Rock Blues’ (Vocalion 1631, 1930) and ‘Soo Cow Soo’ (Vocalion 1658, 1931), they both can be considered perhaps the most involved, in terms of using multiple regions on the neck. Figure 3.28 shows a lexicon of chord shapes used by Minnie in these two songs in D major;
Figure 3.28 Common I, IV and V chord shapes/harmonic areas in D major.

While still using only I, IV and V chords in this key, Minnie uses multiple forms of each. In ‘Plymouth Rock Blues’, she maps her opening solo around the second form of the I chord, sliding it up to 10th position for her IV chord. During the song ‘Soo Cow Soo’, Minnie begins her solo with material mapped around the long second form of the I chord, returning to first position chords for the rest of the opening solo. While Minnie’s use of the key of D can be considered infrequent during her early period, the extended use of the neck via mapping around multiple regions is a foreshadowing of the approach that she takes frequently in her middle and late periods.

In conclusion, the analysis of Minnie’s approach in her early period uncovers a clear application of a systematic approach to lead solo construction, based on the principal of mapping melodic lines around underlying chord shape areas, resulting in recurrent intra- and inter key master riffs and gestures.

Middle Period (1935-39)

Minnie had her last recording session with Kansas Joe in September 1934, signalling the end of her early career period, one that was dominated by guitar duo recordings. The next phase of her career, between 1935-1939, is marked by collaborations in numerous combo formats. While Minnie no longer played solos on every recording, as she had in her early period, she can still be heard playing lead on a majority of sides, in addition to comping. Although now functioning in multiple different ensembles, with a variety of musicians, Minnie

106 See Del Rey (2014) for transcriptions of ‘Soo Cow Soo’ and ‘Plymouth Rock Blues’.
maintains a consistent idiolect and approach to lead solo construction as seen in her early period, primarily utilizing the principle of mapping solos around functional harmonic shapes in a given key.

One of the first songs recorded in Minnie’s middle period ‘Dirty Mother for You (Decca 7048, 1935) features her in a guitar and piano duo. Figure 3.29 shows a transcription of Minnie’s brief opening solo to the song, played in the key of D major;

![Figure 3.29 Memphis Minnie 'Dirty Mother For You' (Decca 7048, 1935. Track time 0:00 – 0:08). Middle period opening solo in D major with annotation of melodic mapping.](image)

As can be seen in the transcription in figure 3.29, Minnie uses the same standard chord shapes in this solo as those identified in songs played in D major during her early period, mapping her solo onto said chords (see figure 3.28). Additionally, the sign-off riff in bars 3-4 of this introduction, mapped around the I and IV7 chord shapes, is almost identical to that heard in ‘Soo Cow Soo’ (track time 0:16), recorded with Kansas Joe in 1931. So although moving into a new period, Minnie retains her master riff vocabulary. Minnie is featured on two other solos during the song ‘Dirty Mother For You’, in which she can be characterised as using a wider registral range than was typical in her earlier period. As can be seen in figure 3.30, during the song’s first full guitar solo, Minnie plays her first phrase on the bass strings, playing into territory that used to be covered by her rhythm guitar partner, now available for her to explore as the only guitarist on the track;
Figure 3.30  Memphis Minnie ‘Dirty Mother For You’ (Decca 7048, 1935. Track time 0:53 – 1:15). First full guitar solo with annotation of chord mapping.

As shown in figure 3.30, in bars 5-12 Minnie returns to playing material mainly drawn from the opening solo. During her second featured solo on this recording, Minnie takes the same approach, only now beginning her solo in an upper register before returning to repeated material;
As can be seen in figure 3.31, Minnie begins her second solo with a riff mapped over the third form of the D chord, in 10th position, reaching up to the 13 fret, in order to incorporate the b3 of the chord, which she bends up toward a natural 3, vacillating between the two pitches for the entire bar, creating a sense of modal ambiguity. After the first phrase, she returns to 1st position and repeats phrases 2 and 3 of the opening and first full solo. Within these three brief solos from the same song, Minnie covers much more registral
territory than was typical in the solos examined from her early period, yet is still guided by the principal of chord shape mapping.

An analysis of 72 songs recorded during Minnie’s middle period, again shows her tendency toward playing in certain keys, with the key of G and C major most frequently represented, in addition to songs in D, A and E major. The data in figure 3.32 shows the frequency of key choice in her middle period, in comparison with those recorded in her early period;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keys and Tunings</th>
<th>Early Period</th>
<th>Middle Period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Major</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish (in G Major)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E Major</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G Major</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vestapol (in D Major)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Major</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D Major</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.32  Early and Middle period keys.

What is immediately noticeable in figure 3.32 is Minnie’s complete turn away from the use of open tunings during her middle period. While open tunings are effective when playing solo, or when working out rehearsed arrangements with another guitarist, they are less viable when playing with other instrumentalists, due to inherently guitaristic nature of the approach. Also, while the use of open tunings was a definitive signifier of the early country blues style (see figure 3.5), in the transition to a more contemporary, urban blues style during the 1930s, the device became passé, and was phased out by many players. Further, the standard tuning keys that Minnie has been highly reliant on in her early period (G and A major) become a less frequent choice, while inversely, the keys least utilized in her earlier period become the most frequently used in her middle period. Additionally, the use of a capo, as seen frequently in her early period also drops away in her middle period, resulting in her playing in a narrower range
of sounding keys. In perspective, Minnie’s approach in her middle period becomes more unified and therefore her process becomes even more identifiable.

**Middle Period Songs in G Major**

As seen in figure 3.32, G major was the most common choice of key on the sides Minnie recorded during her middle period (31 of 72 songs analyzed). She continues to follow her established convention of chord mapping, as in the song ‘When You’re Asleep’ (Decca 7048, 1935), played with a pianist. Minnie’s brief opening solo, played in G Major, is mapped around first position open chords associated with the key (see figure 3.24). As can be seen in figure 3.33, on the song ‘You Can’t Rule Me’ (Vocalion 03697, 1937), played in the key of G major, with trumpet, piano and drums, Minnie maps her opening solo around first and second forms of the I and IV chords;
Figure 3.33  Memphis Minnie ‘You Can’t Rule Me’ (Vocalion 03697, 1937. Track Time 0:06 – 0:28). Middle period opening solo in G major with annotation of melodic mapping and master riffs.

Minnie maps the first two phrases of this solo around the 2nd form of the I and IV chords, highlighting the $^\flat 3$ of the key within both shapes. She uses syncopations and rhythmic pushes on the entrance of some bars for added interest, in addition to juxtaposing open and closed string pitches for tonal contrast (see bars 7-8). During bar 9 and 11 she uses a harmonic b3 in a dominant 7 chord bar, effectively mixing modes, in addition to ending the solo with a sign-off master riff. Notably, these devices were both identified in the analysis of songs in G major from her early period.
Additionally, the key of C major is well represented in Minnie’s middle period, with 21 of 72 songs analysed played in this key. Her approach is briefly exemplified in the transcription in figure 3.34 of the opening solo to ‘Man, You Won’t Give Me No Money’ (Vocalion 03474, 1936), recorded with a piano, bass and percussion;

![Figure 3.34](image)

Figure 3.34  Memphis Minnie ‘Man, You Won’t Give Me No Money’ (Vocalion 03474, 1936. Track time 0:00 – 0:10). Middle period opening solo in C major with annotation of melodic mapping.

As seen in figure 3.34, Minnie continues to follow her now established convention, mapping this opening solo around first and second form chords in the key of C, emphasizing pentatonic pitches over diatonic harmonies (bar 1), and ending the solo with a master sign-off riff.

While this section has briefly touched upon some short examples that demonstrate Minnie’s approach during her middle period, the close analysis of 72 sides further re-enforces the perspective that although navigating a new phase of her career, playing in various combos with numerous musical partners, Minnie retains core idiotechniques as identified in her early period. She continues to map melodic solos over chord areas, relying more extensively on extended forms of the I, IV and V chords, resulting in a wider registral profile of many of her solos. In this period she also maintains a close alignment with the established norms of blues guitarists including the use of pentatonism, slides and bends. While Minnie maintains the use
of consistent chord shapes/areas, as well as master riffs and gestures associated with certain keys, her focus shifts to working extensively in the keys G and C major (in contrast to the prevalence of A and D major keys in her early period), as well as a complete move away from the use of open tunings.

**Late Period (1939-1953)**

Minnie’s first recording session with guitarist and singer Little Son Joe took place in February 1939, marking the beginning of her third career period. In this period, Minnie began engaging with the amplified acoustic guitar and later the electric guitar. Minnie’s guitar work on sides including ‘Me and My Chauffeur Blues’ (Okeh 06288, 1941), ‘Looking the World Over’ (Okeh 06707, 1941) and ‘Black Rat Swing’ (Okeh 06707, 1941) clearly demonstrate an increased use of sustain provided by amplification. Tracks from the late 1940s such as ‘Three Times Seven Blues (Columbia 38099, 1947) and ‘Tears On My Pillow’ (Columbia 30176, 1949) feature Minnie playing on an electric guitar, using an increased level of distortion. Although working with new technology, Minnie’s main approach in this period is again consistent with that of her early and middle periods.

### Keys and Tunings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Early Period</th>
<th>Mid Period</th>
<th>Late Period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Major</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E Major</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G Major</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vestapol</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Major</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D Major</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>66</strong></td>
<td><strong>72</strong></td>
<td><strong>59</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3.35**  Early, Middle and Late Period Keys.

As can be seen in figure 3.35, Minnie returns to playing in keys preferred in her early period, especially A and E major, but in doing so continues to apply the expanded neck approach as identified in her middle period. However, songs from her late period can also be linked to those from her early period, in relation to her reliance upon common master riffs,
gestures and chord areas. The song ‘Call the Fire Wagon’ (Vocalion 04858), recorded in 1939 exemplifies this cross-period correlation. As seen in figure 3.36, ‘Call the Fire Wagon’ is played in the key of A major, which can be defined as her most frequently utilized key in her late period (as it was in her early period), with 30 of 59 songs analyzed from this period being played in this key;

Figure 3.36  Memphis Minnie ‘Call the Fire Wagon’ (Vocalion 04858, 1939. Track time 0:00-0:18). Late period opening Solo in A major with annotation of melodic mapping.
Minnie maps the beginning of this solo around a second form I and IV chord in the fifth position, before retuning to first position, working around the long A chord, and ending the solo with a sign-off riff. Each of these tropes can be related to her early period songs in A major, and to intra-key gestures identified in both her early and middle catalogue.

The song ‘Looking the World Over’ (Okeh 06707), recorded with Little Son Joe in 1941 is also played in A major, and features Minnie playing two exceptional lead solos. These solos are again representative of many facets of idiotechne, as identified in her early and middle career periods, now carried into her later career period. As can be seen in figure 3.37, during the song’s opening solo, Minnie maps her lead line over her common first position chord areas in A major (see figure 3.17);

![Image of guitar tablature showing Minnie's lead line over her common first position chord areas in A major.](image)

Figure 3.37  Memphis Minnie ‘Looking the World Over’ (Okeh 06707, 1941. Track time 0:00 – 0:12). Late period opening solo in A major with annotation of melodic mapping.

During this brief 4-bar introduction, Minnie maps over first position chords, slightly bending a re-iterated ^b7 to begin the solo. The solo meanders through almost two octaves in
the space of three bars, using double stops, glissandi and cross-strung thirds for added colour, before ending with a new iteration of a sign-off riff, in bar 4, outlining an imperfect cadence (IC) mapped around the I (long A) and V chord area. While this device functions in the same way as the master sign-off riffs heard throughout her earlier catalogue, this evolved variant is one that she begins to draw upon throughout her later period.

Minnie’s main solo in this song also follows her middle period convention, demonstrating a more expansive use of the fretboard;
As can be seen in the transcription in figure 3.38, Minnie maps the bulk of her main solo around the third form A shape, in addition to pushing up to the octave repeat of the first form A shape in bar 2, drawing heavily on the available double-stops found in these positions. In keeping with her established approach, she ends the solo with an IC sign-off riff, identical to that heard in the opening solo. As well as being able to identify a consistent approach of mapping and the use of master riffs, important to note is that in each bar of the solo, there are identifiable nuances, both intentional and idiomatic, that can be associated with Minnie’s use of the amplified instrument. The utilization of glissandi, identifiable in songs in both her early and middle period, is now intensified by the ability to slide further on the amplified instrument, due to enhanced sustain. In bar 4, Minnie uses a slide as an effective timbral tool, aggressively sliding out of the A on beat 3. This note is played on the 2nd string (10th fret), and she slides down a large length of the string before repositioning her finger on the third string to slide back up to the F# (11th fret) on the downbeat of bar 5. This type of gesture is likely
not only a result of an intentional addition of colour, yet also a physical by-product of a performance gesture – a gesture that adds sonic interest, and is also visually appealing when in front of an audience. Staccato articulations are used throughout the solo, again both for expressive purposes, and likely to facilitate position shifts. Frequent cross-stringing is identifiable, and the resonance of cross-strung note pairs, a device Minnie has drawn on throughout her catalogue, is now intensified by the amplified instrument, due to its enhanced sustain and overtones. Therefore, in addition to demonstrating a consistency of idiotechne, this analysis also points to Minnie’s ability to negotiate, and effectively harness, the idiosyncrasies of new technology.

**Late Period Songs in E Major**

As shown in figure 3.35, E major was another well-represented key choice in Minnie’s late period, with 12 of 59 analysed songs played in the key. ‘Lonesome Shack Blues’ (Okeh 05728, 1940), recorded with Little Son Joe in 1940, well exemplifies Minnie’s late period approach to lead construction in the key of E. As can be seen in figure 3.39, Minnie begins this solo in first position, mapping around common E Major I, IV and V chord shapes (see figure 3.22), using cross-string articulations and pentatonic material associated with those shapes;
She plays an arpeggiated double-stop gesture in bar 3, over V chord material, and ends with a double-stop sign-off variant in bar 4, again drawing on the IC sign-off convention as seen in ‘Looking the World Over’.

During this song’s main solo, Minnie again employs upper position chord forms, juxtaposing the upper fretboard region against that of the lower position used in the opening solo. As can be seen in figure 3.40, Minnie maps her main solo over her upper position I and IV chord shapes for the first eight bars of the solo;
Figure 3.40  Memphis Minnie ‘Lonesome Shack Blues’ (Okeh 05728, 1940. Track time 1:49 – 2:20). Late period main solo in E major with annotation of melodic mapping and master riffs.
Minnie begins this solo mapping her line over the third and second form E shapes in bar 1-4, before moving into the second form A7 shape in bar 5. She uses glissandi, hammer-on grace notes and bends for articulation, and in bar 7 returns to first position chord areas, continuing to use the aforementioned articulative devices for added nuance. To close the solo, Minnie draws on the arpeggiated, descending double-stop turnaround riff, into the IC sign-off riff.

**Late Period Songs in G Major**

The song ‘In My Girlish Days’ (Okeh 06410, 1941), featuring Little Son Joe and a bassist, is played in the key of G and well exemplifies Minnie’s more expansive approach to lead break construction, both during the opening and mid-song solo.

![Figure 3.41: Memphis Minnie ‘In My Girlish Days’ (Okeh 06410, 1941. Track time 0:00 – 0:12). Late period opening solo in G major with annotation of melodic mapping and master riffs.](image)

As seen in figure 3.41, Minnie begins her opening solo with a double-stop gesture mapped over the fourth form I chord, incorporating the root and b3 of the chord, played over Little Son Joe’s major I chord. With added micro-bends on Minnie’s double-stop, the pair effectively employ mode-mixture between rhythm and lead guitar. The sign-off riff at the end of the opening solo draws on Minnie’s early period convention of using an octave leap to a
tonic note to signal the end of a solo, but she then drops down a perfect 4\textsuperscript{th} to a D pitch, the 5\textsuperscript{th} of the tonic chord, but also the root of the V chord, supporting Little Son Joe’s underlying harmony, and asserting an IC sign-off riff, now a master-riff associated with Minnie’s late period\textsuperscript{107}.

Through this brief exploration of a selection of representative lead solos from Minnie’s late period, it is clear that she demonstrates a consistency of idiotechne, traceable from her earliest recordings in 1929 though to the sides recorded at the end of her late period in 1953. Demonstrating a continued reliance upon chord shape mapping, in her later period Minnie systematically navigates the neck based on the multi-form chord system (an approach she first incorporated during her middle period), resulting in solos during her later period that are more expansive, covering greater registral territory. She continues to draw heavily on pentatonic material found within those harmonic areas, as well as using somatic gestures such as bends, slides and slurs to craft nuanced solos. Master riffs, common to her earlier periods can also be heard across her later catalogue, notably sign-off and double-stops riffs, as well as new variants, such as the IC sign-off.

3.5 Seed Riffs

As seen in the previous analysis, Minnie’s consistent use of riffs can be characterised as one of the identified stylistic norms of early blues guitar playing (see figure 3.5). In the previous section, her use of master-riffs, heard recurrently across her catalogue, were identified and defined as one of Minnie’s idiotechniques, showing a personalized engagement with the anticipated norms of blues guitar playing. In addition to the use of repeated master-riffs on a global level (within songs and across her catalogue), Minnie also engages with riffs

\textsuperscript{107} See appendix C, figure C.4 transcription, for an additional example of Minnie’s expanded-neck approach on a late period song in G major, in the main solo of the song ‘In My Girlish Days’ (Okeh 06410, 1941), with annotation of melodic mapping and master riffs.
on a local level (within songs), in a way that can be defined as ‘seeding’; that is, introducing a short melodic gesture in the opening solo or verse of a song, which is then “used as a starting point for multiple ensuing phrases” (Mermikides 2010, p. 174).

This approach is exemplified during Minnie’s guitar part on ‘When the Levee Breaks’, a song previously analysed in this chapter as a representative example of her approach to playing in Spanish tuning during her early period. In addition to identifying master riffs such as the sign-off riffs in bar 8 and 20 (see figure 3.12), the descending chromatic double-stop in bar 7-8 also acts as a ‘seed’ riff; melodic material that Minnie plants in the opening and subsequently cultivates throughout the song. This approach adds a further dimension to her personal engagement with one of the characteristic norms of the blues style (the use of repeated riffs), and creates a sense of unity within her guitar arrangements. Figure 3.42 shows a transcription of the first verse of ‘When the Levee Breaks’;
If it keeps on raining levee's going to break

Guitar 1 Tuning: Spanish, capo at 2nd fret
Guitar 2 Tuning: Standard
As can be seen in figure 3.42, in bars 1-4 of the first verse, Minnie plays accompanimental and responsorial material, interacting with Joe’s vocal line (Joe is also

While Minnie is playing in G Spanish tuning, with a capo at 2, her guitar part is transcribed here in standard notation in the original sounding key of A major, in order to reflect her interaction with Kansas Joe’s guitar part, who is playing in the key of A in standard tuning.
playing the rhythm guitar part here). Much of Minnie’s material in this first phrase is derived from the double-stop seed first presented by Minnie in the introduction solo (figure 3.12, bar 7). Further, bars 6, 8, 9 and 10 of Minnie’s guitar part in verse 1 are ‘grown’ from variants of the seed. Upon analysing each of the subsequent verses of the song, it becomes apparent that Minnie uses a variant of the double-stop seed riff as an opening gesture in each of the ensuing nine verses;
Figure 3.43 Kansas Joe and Memphis Minnie ‘When the Levee Breaks’ (Columbia 14439-D, 1929). Seed riff cultivation in verse 1-9, bars 1-2.
Figure 3.43 shows Minnie’s systematic cultivation of the double-stop seed riff in the first and second bar of each of the sung verses. During verse 1 she plays a lower neighbour variation of the riff, and it is noticeable that this variant is non-resolving, unlike the original statement in the introduction. However, in verse 2 she plays a rhythmically syncopated, yet resolving variant of the riff. She varies the entrance of the statement in verses 1 to 2, with an off-beat entrance in verse 1 and a downbeat entrance in verse 2. During verses 3 and 4 Minnie plays a straight quaver presentation of the riff, but uses glissandi into the downbeat to add interest. Again, verse 4 is a syncopated variant of verse 3 and during verse 5 and 6 she plays a descending statement of the riff, this time resolving and rhythmically varying each statement. During verse 6, Minnie holds the first diad of the riff for an entire bar, creating a heightened sense of anticipation before its resolution. During verse 7, she plays a straight quaver iteration of the double-stop, but again uses slides to add articulative interest. In verse 8, Minnie plays the least closely related variation of the riff, with her variant implying the descending nature of the previous variants, but using textural contrast for variety. In verse 9, Minnie plays a version of the riff closely related to the statement in verse 6.

While this close analysis compares her cultivation of a simple seed gesture, specifically within bars 1 and 2 of each verse, Minnie also draws on this seed in many other places throughout the song, creating a high level of motivic unity. She frequently extends the gesture into bars 3 and 4 of the verse (during verse 1 and 3 she extends the variant through bars 1-6), and uses the riff at later points during the verse, (as in verse 2, bars 7 and 10).

Similarly, at the end of first verse (bar 11) Minnie presents another seed riff, mapped around the V chord area, which she then links to a variant of a sign off-riff (bar 12), as seen in figure 3.44;
When investigating the recurrence of this riff throughout the song, it is noticeable that bars 11-12 of each verse use either the exact riff (as a master) or a variant of the riff (a cultivated seed);
Figure 3.45 Kansas Joe and Memphis Minnie ‘When the Levee Breaks’ (Columbia 14439-D, 1929). Seed riff cultivation in verse 1-9, bars 11-12 (original key: A major).
As can be seen in figure 3.45, Minnie repeats the seed riff at the end of verses 1, 2, 3, 4, 6 and 7, and uses a rhythmic variation in of the riff in verses 5 and 8. In verse 9, as a closing gesture Minnie returns to the meta-version of the descending double-stop with a simple octave leap sign-off riff to end\textsuperscript{109}.

The use of seed riffs, as explored here in one of her earliest recordings, can be heard across Memphis Minnie’s catalogue, in each of her career periods, and can therefore be defined as one of her idiotechniques. A representative example from her later period can be found in the song ‘Me and My Chauffer Blues’ (Okeh Records 06288), recorded with Little Son Joe and a bass player during a May 1941 session in Chicago. The song, played in G major, is loosely based on a 12-bar form, with the second and third phrase extended to 7 bars each, resulting in an 18-bar form. Additionally, bars 7 and 18 are extended to 6 beats, creating moments of metric dissonance within the asymmetrical hypermetric structure. The song features Minnie playing two solos, and she begins her opening solo with a 4-beat seed riff that can be subsequently traced throughout the song;

\textsuperscript{109} Notably, the entire second instrumental break is based on a vamp of the double-stop reed riff and sign-off riff (track time 1:40-2:10).
Figure 3.46  Memphis Minnie. ‘Me and My Chauffeur Blues’ (Okeh Records 06288, 1941. Track time 0:00-0:30). Introduction solo with annotation of seed riff.
As can be seen in figure 3.46, Minnie begins her solo on the pick up to bar 1, articulating the ^2 twice, as quavers, with the second quaver immediately bent up a whole tone, through the ^b3 to the natural ^3, which she then holds (on the second string) whilst articulating the ^5 on the adjacent first string. The riff then descends from the held ^5, down to the still-bent natural ^3, descending through the ^1, finally coming to rest on the ^b7. The ^b7 is played on the fourth beat of bar 1, in anticipation of the downbeat of bar 2, and is then held through the first three beats of bar 2. Although this opening riff simply outlines the I7 chord tones, the use of the bend into the natural ^3, the cross-string colour relationship between the held ^3 and ^5, as well as the final off-beat placement of the ^b7 add richness and depth to the gesture. Minnie then immediately re-asserts the gesture, beginning on the pick-up to bar 3 and through bar 4. As the solo continues, Minnie introduces new material, mapped around upper form I, IV and V chord shapes, with abbreviated versions of the seed occurring in bars 8 and 16, which coincide with the tonic chord return in the second and third phrases.

During the ensuing verses, Minnie mainly plays accompanimental material, typically adding responsorial fills during the breaks in her sung vocal line. The seed riff is heard during the verses, often cultivated in the form of cross-strung thirds over IV and V chords. Between the third and fourth verse, Minnie plays another full solo, built primarily on a variant of the seed riff;
As seen in the transcription in figure 3.47, Minnie insistently cycles a variant of the seed (defined as such by the incorporation of the $^2$-$^3$-$^5$ bend gesture) for the first eight bars of the solo, over the I and IV chords. She further shortens the seed in bars 9 and 10, opting to eliminate the bend of the $^2$, holding the pitch for 6 beats before closing the solo with a master sign-off riff. Although relatively simplistic, the solo is unified through the modification of the seed, which, by this point in the song, is highly recognizable after its constant assertion during the opening solo and verses.
This brief examination of Memphis Minnie’s use of seed riffs has aimed to further illuminate one of her idiotechniques, allowing a more robust conceptualization of her personalised engagement with stylistic norms. As noted briefly in the previous sections of this chapter, another stylistic norm that Memphis Minnie frequently incorporated was call and response, and her creative engagement with the device is worthy of further examination. As identified by Evans, using the guitar in response to, or punctuating a vocal melody “rather than merely providing rhythmic and harmonic background” (2001, p.22), was a common practice amongst early blues players. This incorporation of call-response, a device described by scholar Samuel Floyd, as the “master trope” (1995, p. 95) of all African-American musical styles, can be identified throughout Memphis Minnie’s catalogue.

Returning to the transcription of the verse from ‘When the Levee Breaks’ in figure 3.42, during the verse, Kansas Joe’s vocal line occupies the first two bars of each phrase within a 12 bar, AAB format (a, c, e), leaving two ‘empty’ bars at the end of each phrase for Minnie’s lead guitar responses (b, d, f). Seen in figure 3.48, this scheme corresponds with one that blues scholar, Jeff Todd Titon considers normative within the blues;

![Typical two-bar line division scheme in twelve-bar blues form (drawn from Titon 1994).](image)

As seen in the first verse of ‘When the Levee Breaks’, during phrase A1 (figure 3.42, bars 1-4) Joe sings during bars 1 and 2, while Minnie plays a lead-guitar response in bars 3 and
4. The duo continues this scheme during the A2 and B phrases. As previously identified, Minnie primarily uses modified seed riff material to craft her responses, and this same approach can be seen on Minnie’s 1930 version of ‘Bumble Bee’ on which she sings and plays lead, while Kansas Joe plays rhythm guitar;
Figure 3.49  Kansas Joe and Memphis Minnie ‘Bumble Bee’ (Vocalion 1476, 1930. Track time 0:33-1:06). Call and response scheme, verse 1.
As seen in the transcription of the first verse of ‘Bumble Bee’ (1930), the verse follows the normative AAB 12-bar pattern, with Minnie using the guitar in response to her voice, as well as adding counter-melodic fills to support her vocal line. During the first phrase (A1) Minnie sings a call in bars 1-2 (a). Here, she punctuates the down-beat of each bar with a single note on the guitar. In bars 3-4 (b) she plays a re-iterated double-stop riff, in response to her vocal line. During phrase A2, in addition to using the guitar in the traditional responsorial role in d, Minnie takes more of an active role in c, responding to the abbreviated vocal statement in bar 5 and playing a counter-melodic line under her vocals in bar 6 (typically a call bar, not response bar). Similarly during the final phrase of the verse (B), Minnie plays counter-melodic material under her vocal line in e, and then plays a traditional responsorial line in bar 11, with a familiar sign-off riff in bar 12. Noticeably, Minnie uses her guitar in a texturally varied way throughout the verse, and at different times the functional role of her guitar can be defined as punctuative, counter-melodic or responsorial.

While many of Minnie’s songs incorporate the device of call-and response, as seen in ‘Bumble Bee’, she often modifies the normative 2-bar call and response scheme for creative purpose. Returning to the song ‘Looking the World Over’ (1941), a transcription of the first verse in figure 3.50 identifies the use of call and response. While the verses are structured in 12-bar AAB harmonic form, Minnie deviates from the traditional AAB lyrical structure;
Figure 3.50  Memphis Minnie ‘Looking the World Over’ (Okeh 06707, 1941. Track time 0:12 – 0:41). Call and response scheme, verse 1.
As seen in figure 3.50, the first line of the lyric extends for all four bars of the A1 phrase, leaving no space for a typical guitar response in b. Instead, Minnie punctuates this first phrase with notes on the guitar, using a simple, repetitive melo-rhythmic gesture. During the A2 phrase she again deviates from the traditional scheme, alternating call and response areas, with vocals falling in bar 5 and 7 and full responsorial riffs from the guitar in bars 6 and 8. The final B phrase can be considered a normative call-response statement, with Minnie singing a call in e, drawing on the melo-rhythmic gesture from phrase A1 as accompaniment, and finally playing a typical responsorial riff in f, recycling the IC master riff as a sign-off gesture.

**Minnie and Fingerstyle**

While analysing Minnie’s engagement with call and response, and the resultant multi-functional approach to playing, it is of benefit to assess Minnie’s process on her solo fingerstyle sides. Although the majority of Minnie’s recorded catalogue features her in duo or small combo formats, Minnie recorded 13 self-accompanied solo songs between November 1933 and May 1935. Each of these solo recordings demonstrates formidable fingerstyle guitar skills and a complete self-sufficiency as a solo performer. Additionally, they are marked by frequent engagement with call and response and multi-functionality, as well as the continued use of chord-area mapping and master riffs associated with certain keys, thus demonstrating that Minnie maintains her established idiotechne, even within a new mode of playing.

For each of her solo sides, Minnie uses a traditional blues dead-thumb fingerstyle technique in the right hand, playing a root note of the chord on each beat of the bar, (with some deviations such as passing tones), while playing a largely syncopated melodic line with the fingers on the treble strings. What is evident is that her approach to playing fingerstyle is allied with her approach to playing lead, mapping solos around chord areas, a necessity when

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110 Cohen describes the dead thumb technique as “playing four beats to the measure on the same string” (1996, p. 459).
playing fingerstyle in order for a player to access chord-tone bass notes while simultaneously playing lead lines.

As can be seen in figure 3.51, Minnie utilised the same keys when playing on her solo fingerstyle sides, as used during her middle and late periods;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keys</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Major</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E Major</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Major</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G Major</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D Major</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>13</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.51 Playing keys on Memphis Minnie's solo fingerstyle sides.

Recorded during her May 1935 solo session for Decca, the song ‘Reachin Pete’ (Decca 7102, 1935), well exemplifies Minnie’s technical approach to fingerstyle playing. Played in the key of G major, the song features five verses and three instrumental sections; an introduction solo, a break between verses three and four and an outro solo. The introduction solo features Minnie playing an eight-bar solo over a static I chord, playing the root of the chord with her thumb on the main beats, whilst playing a single, syncopated line on the treble strings with her fingers;
As can be seen in the transcription in figure 3.52, the opening solo stays in first position, mapped over the I7 and I chords, utilising the ^b3 on the third string and ^b7 on the first string. When referring back to figure 3.25, a transcription of the opening solo from ‘Can I Do It For You? Part 1’, an early period song recorded with Kansas Joe in 1930 and played in the key of G, similar harmonic areas and melodic mapping is apparent. In the song ‘Reachin’ Pete’, Minnie enhances her opening solo with frequent cross-string gestures, juxtaposing the ^5 and ^6 on the second/first string set, and the ^b3 and natural ^3 on the third/second string set. Minnie often bends the ^b3, increasing the timbral contrast between the cross-strung ^b3 and natural ^3, notably all gestures identifiable within the ‘Can I Do It For You? Part 1’ solo (figure 3.25), and other lead solos played in G major. Finally, Minnie ends the ‘Reachin’ Pete’ opening solo with a leap to a tonic note, a master-riff identifiable across her catalogue.

During the sung verses of this song, Minnie continues to employ a dead-thumb fingerstyle approach, playing accompanimental lines under the vocals in the ‘call’ phrases, with
prominent melodic guitar lines played during the ‘response’ phrases, all while maintaining a steady chord-root bassline with her thumb. Between verses 3 and 4, Minnie plays a full fingerstyle solo, in similar to of the opening\textsuperscript{111}.

A close analysis of Minnie’s approach on the solo side ‘My Butcher Man’ (Okeh 8948), recorded in Chicago in November 1933, further exemplifies Minnie’s approach to playing fingerstyle, as well as engagement with call and response, chord mapping and seed riffs. Played in the key of A major, the guitar is in standard tuning but down one fret, resulting in a sounding key of Ab major. Due to the chosen playing key area of A major, the root notes of the I, IV and V chord are all played on open bass strings, allowing the left hand fingers freedom to fret melodic material, resulting in a more involved guitar part than that seen in her fingerstyle songs played in G major.

‘My Butcher Man’ begins with a 4-bar solo, played in a dead-thumb style, accompanying a spoken introduction;

\textsuperscript{111} See appendix C, figure C.5 for a transcription of the main solo for the song ‘Reachin’ Pete’ (Decca 7102, 1935).
As can be seen in figure 3.53, Minnie maps her solo around the open E7 and long A chords in first position, incorporating pentatonic material located within the chord areas. Minnie uses a master sign-off riff at the end of bar 3, into bar 4, culminating with an embellishing I chord master-riff, notably devices identified in her lead approach on her duo and combo sides. Additionally, Minnie draws on somatic norms (bends and slides) for added colour.

After the brief opening solo, the songs subsequent sung verses (six in total) are structured in a standard twelve-bar form with an AAB lyric structure. As seen in the previous analysis of Minnie’s engagement with call and response, during the verses she divides the AAB phrases into 2 bar vocal line/guitar response units, while constantly maintaining a steady root note bass-line in order to maintain the harmonic structure of the form.
On initial appraisal, the guitar can be considered as functioning in the standard call and response fashion, playing accompanimental material during a, c, d and responsorial material during b, d, f;
As can be seen in the transcription figure in 3. 54, Minnie’s guitar accompaniment in a and c are mapped around the long A chord, and second-form D major shape. Her response material in c is mapped around the second-form A chord and in d, a double-stop descending riff is mapped around the long A form, all gestures associated with her recurrent vocabulary. To close the verse, Minnie transplants the phrase from her introduction solo (figure 3.53), revealing the songs opening solo to be classified as a seed phrase.

Another notable element of this guitar part is the functional quality of the material in the guitar’s call and melodic-response phrases. While characteristically, accompanimental gestures can be considered passive, playing a supporting role, and response gestures active, both sets of material here can be defined as active. While the response interacts with the vocal call, the accompaniment gestures can be defined as self-interactive;
Figure 3.55  Memphis Minnie, ‘My Butcher Man’ (Okeh 8948, 1933). Verse 1, bars 1-4, call and response scheme.

As can be seen in figure 3.55, in bar 1 of the guitar part from the first verse of ‘My Butcher Man’, Minnie plays a descending pentatonic riff mapped around the long A chord on beats 1 and 2, which she then repeats, with a modified rhythmic profile (effectively double-timing the statement) in beats 3-4 of the bar. In essence, the material played on beats 3 - 4 is heard as an echo response to the material played on beats 1-2, therefore harnessing the call and response device, and functioning as such within its own dimension. As if to further engage with the call and response function, the same figure is then repeated in bar 2. Here, bar 2 functions as an echo response to bar 1.

During bars 3 and 4 (the normative responsorial phrase b), Minnie plays a repeated double-stop triplet riff, embellished with slides, mapped around the second form A chord, resolving upward at the end of bar 4, ascending through the ^b7 to the ^1. Here, this riff is perceived as functioning both as a response to the active guitar line in bars 1 and 2, in addition to functioning in the normative a-b role (vocal call - guitar response).
As previously noted, the call and response trope in African-American music has been considered by a number of scholars as a “master trope” (Ramsey 2004, p. 95). While Minnie’s engagement with this device was identified in a number of the previous analyses, in this chapter the focused analysis in this example demonstrates her use of the guitar in a call and response fashion on both a macro- and micro-level, asserting her mastery of the master trope.

As seen in figure 3.56, during the second verse of ‘My Butcher Man’, Minnie’s guitar part and vocal line continue to interact in the normative call and response scheme, with the guitar providing accompaniment gestures in a, c, e and responsorial melodies in b, d and f.
As can be seen in figure 3.56, during phrases A1 and A2 Minnie draws on seed material from verse 1 during the accompaniment sections (a, c), and composes new material in response sections (b, d). Again, in the B phrase, Minnie uses identical material to that used in the equivalent phrase in verse 1 and the opening solo, unifying the ending of each of the songs main sections, through the use of a master phrase. A scheme showing the recurrence of seed material in verses 1 and 2 is shown in figure 3.57;
Figure 3.57  Memphis Minnie, 'My Butcher Man' (Okeh 8948, 1933). Verses 1 and 2, seed material scheme.
When examining Minnie’s process in verses 3-6, it is notable that she draws on seed material first presented in verses 1 and 2, in order to craft her guitar part for the remainder of the song. As can be seen in figure 3.58, the a, c, e and f phrases of verse 3-6 are identifiable as the seed phrase first introduced in verse 1, and phrases b and d (response phrases) are equivalent seed phrases from either verse 1 or 2, with a 2-bar exception in verse 3, bars 7-8.
Figure 3.58  Memphis Minnie, ‘My Butcher Man’ (Okeh 8948, 1933). Complete seed material scheme.
This close analysis of ‘My Butcher Man’ elucidates Minnie’s multi-level engagement with call and response elements, in addition to the multiple layers of musical function present between both voice and guitar, and intra-instrumentally.

After six sung verses, Minnie closes the song with an instrumental solo, which after the systematic cultivation of seed material within the first six verses, is refreshingly contrasting in nature.
During bars 1-4, Minnie vamps on a static double-stop riff, mapped from the second form A shape, enhanced by syncopation. Bars 5-6 draw on a riff similar to that heard in the c phrases of the verses, but more melodically driven. In bars 7 and 8, Minnie plays a rolling triplet riff that references her triplet gestures in the verse. During the verses, Minnie used triplets sporadically, usually only for one beat within a bar of swung quavers, but here she draws them over the entire bar, into the down-beat of bar 8, emphatically asserting the gesture. The pick-up into bar 10 begins a sequence of syncopated major 2nds, likely played in a cross-string position on strings 1 and 2, ending with a minor 2nd between the ^b3 and natural ^3, before beginning a descending riff that traverses more than an octave in the space of a bar. Finally, Minnie ends the song with an unexpected, yet thoroughly definitive, single harmonic played at the twelfth fret.

While this solo is referential to material previously heard in the verses, noticeable is Minnie’s extension of pre-existing material and the introduction of new material, unexpected, yet highly effective. Additionally, what is perhaps most remarkable is the drive and excitement
created within this solo. At the starting point of the solo, the tempo of the song has risen to around 150bpm, and Minnie’s fluidity and command of this final section showcases her substantial technical and musical abilities.

3.6 Memphis Minnie, Influence and Legacy

The preceding analysis of Memphis Minnie’s approach to playing rhythm and lead guitar, in particular her engagement with fingerstyle techniques, master riffs, and call and response, demonstrate her to be a highly skilled and creative guitarist, with an identifiable idio-techne. According to Paul Garon, Minnie’s presence is “written large across the whole history of the blues” (2014, p. 27), with blues scholar Paul Oliver acknowledging her as an “outstanding blues personality”, in addition to possessing a “formidable guitar technique” (1972, p. 122). With a recording career that spanned more than two decades, Minnie’s success and impact was far reaching. Ranked within the top ten best-selling blues artists between the years 1925-1942 (Wald 2004), from the beginning of the 1930s Minnie had “a new record issued every few weeks until the beginning of the Second World War” (Oliver 2001, p. 309), and commanded some of the highest recording fees of any blues artists in the late 1930s (ibid.). Many of her early country blues songs were hits on the race-records charts, such as ‘Bumble Bee’ in 1930, and she continued releasing hit records for over a decade, including ‘Me and My Chauffer Blues’ in 1941 (Garon 2014). Songs from both her early and late periods have been acknowledged as blues ‘standards’, including ‘Bumble Bee’ (1930), ‘Me and My Chauffer Blues’ (1941), ‘Looking the World Over’ (1941) and ‘Black Rat Swing’ (1941).

Due to her sustained commercial success and visibility as a recording artist and performer during the 1930s and 40s, a number of blues musicians, including Bukka White, J.B. Lenoir and Johnny Shines directly acknowledge Minnie as an influence on the development of their own style, and many of her songs were re-recorded by artists within and outside the

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113 For more information see Dickerson (2013) and (Garon 2014).
blues genre, including Big Mama Thornton, Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys and Jefferson Airplane (Garon 2014). Perhaps most important to the context of this study are the covers recorded by a number of influential guitarists, including Tampa Red (‘Bumble Bee Blues’ Vocalion 1619, 1931), John Lee Hooker (‘Bumble Bee Blues’ Staff Records 718, 1951) and Muddy Waters. Palmer notes that Muddy Waters, one of the most influential post-war electric blues players grew up listening to Memphis Minnie, and “tampered with [her] ‘Bumble Bee’ until he’d made it into his own ‘Honey Bee’ [Chess 1468, 1951], which later became one of his classic recordings for Chess” (1981, p. 111). Additionally, Waters and his band accompanied Big Mama Thornton on a 1966 album (Arhoolie Records 9043), which features three Memphis Minnie songs. On their cover of ‘Bumble Bee’, Muddy Waters closely imitates the riffs played by Minnie on her 1930 version of the song. Led Zeppelin, “one of the most commercially successful bands of the 1970s” (Waksman 2001, p. 238), covered Minnie and Kansas Joe’s ‘When the Levee Breaks’ in 1971. Here, we find a connection between Memphis Minnie, one of the most commercially successful lead guitarists in early popular music history, and Jimmy Page, a player considered an “archetype” of the rock “guitar hero” (ibid).

In addition to her far-reaching musical influence, Minnie’s early adoption of the electric guitar supports her inclusion within a robust history of the instrument. According to Obrecht (2017), Minnie was the “first woman to play electric guitar on blues records” in 1941, and Waksman notes that Minnie’s’ early use of the electric guitar “proved to be a formative influence upon the sound of the Chicago blues” (2001, p. 122). Further, he asserts that Minnie’s “local prestige played no small part in establishing the value of the instrument among the city’s musicians”(ibid.)114. Evans (2002) also notes the significance of the adoption of the electric guitar by the community of innovative players in Chicago during the 1930s, including Minnie, Big Bill Broonzy, Tampa Red and Lonnie Johnson. The embrace of new technology

114 Similarly, Davis (2003) notes that Minnie “played a decisive a role as anyone in shaping the sound of the Chicago blues”, specifically noting her guitar riffs, which he describes as possessing a musical “toughness and energy” (p. 143).
by these players influenced the trajectory of the instrument, which went on to become “one of
the most significant of all musical instrument technologies” during the pop/rock era
(Theberge, 2001, p. 25).

3.7 Summary

In conclusion, Memphis Minnie can be considered one of the integral figures of the
eyearly history of the guitar. The analysis in this chapter demonstrates Minnie to be a highly
skilled and versatile guitarist, with a consistent idiotechne that is identifiable across her 25-year
recording career. While Minnie engages with most of the anticipated stylistic norms of the
eyearly blues guitar tradition, she approaches many of them in a highly personalised way, thus
allowing us to clearly define her idiotechne. In particular, her definitive tendencies are a
harmonically driven approach to lead line construction and the use of intra- and inter-key seed
and master riffs. Additionally, of note is her utilisation of the master trope of call and
response, often engaging in a multi-dimensional way with the device, subsequently using the
guitar in multi-functional roles. While Minnie should perhaps not be defined as uniquely
innovative in the same way as Maybelle Carter, it can be argued that through her consistent of
use of a musical vocabulary that was adherent to pre-existing and developing norms of the
eyearly blues guitarists, her continued engagement with these devices on her highly successful
commercial releases from 1929 on, helped embed a lexicon of guitar gestures within the blues,
that are still prevalent in popular guitar playing to this day. As one of the most commercially
successful guitar players of her era, Memphis Minnie’s position within the field was significant,
thus establishing her place in the canon.
Chapter 4

Rosetta Tharpe (1915-1973)

Born in 1915 in Cotton Plant, Arkansas, a small Mississippi delta town about 80 miles west of Memphis, Tennessee, Rosetta Tharpe grew up performing in the church with her mother, Katie Bell Nubin, an evangelist and missionary. Together, the pair performed on the gospel circuit during the 1920s and 30s, where young Rosetta gained a national reputation for her prodigious musical talent.

In the autumn of 1938, Tharpe controversially broke from the church, performing at New York’s Cotton Club. Reviews from the time describe her as a “swinger of spirituals” and a “hymn swinging evangelist”, with the Chicago Defender billing her as the “swingcopated manipulator of loud tone blues” (Wald 2007, p. 38). In October 1938, Tharpe cut her first records for Decca, and the songs soon became the “biggest gospel hits of the thirties” (Heilbut 2002, p. 192). Tharpe’s approach on these recordings is clearly informed by the gospel tradition, yet reconfigured with added elements of blues and swing jazz. She sings and accompanies herself on the guitar, playing virtuosic lead breaks between verses. In addition to becoming hits amongst gospel audiences, Tharpe’s early recordings also achieved commercial success amongst secular audiences. The mainstream commercial success of these records led Tharpe to become known as “gospel's original crossover artist”, and the genre’s “first nationally known star” (Wald 2007, p. viii). In December 1938, Tharpe was invited by producer John Hammond to perform at the historic From Spirituals to Swing concert series at Carnegie Hall in New York City. Sharing the bill with artists such as Duke Ellington, Big Joe

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115 When considering the velocity of Tharpe’s rise to commercial success in just a few months at the end of 1938, it is not a stretch to consider her an “overnight celebrity” (Wald 2007 p. 45).
116 Wald describes the From Spirituals to Swing concert as “one of the most historically significant musical events of the first half of the twentieth century” (Wald, 2007, p. 45). Information about this ground-breaking concert can be found in Reitz (1988) and Wald (2007). The recordings of Tharpe and Albert Ammons’ performance at the concert can be heard on the CD Complete Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Vol. 3., 1937-1951 (Fremeaux and Associates, FA 1303), track 18 and 19.
Turner, and Sidney Bechet, Tharpe performed her hits ‘Rock Me’ and ‘That's All’ accompanied by boogie-woogie pianist Albert Ammons, in front of a sold out audience, further establishing her reputation as a crossover artist. During the 1940s and fifties, Tharpe became a national celebrity, receiving “considerable media exposure” (Jackson 1995, p. 29) and recording dozens of songs, a number of which became hits on the race record charts (Reitz 1988). In addition to recording and publishing her own compositions and arrangements of traditional gospel material, Tharpe recorded and toured with a diverse array of musicians, including swing bands (Noble Sissle and Lucky Millinder Orchestras), piano combos (Sam Price Trio), gospel quartets (The Dixie Hummingbirds and The Golden Gate Quartet) and vocal duos (Marie Knight). When examining Tharpe’s recorded catalogue, it is clear that she expertly negotiated every musical situation that she encountered, “crossing and re-crossing the line between sacred and secular sounds” (Wald 2007, p. ix). During the late 1950s, Tharpe continued to record, as well as tour throughout the United States and Europe, making television appearances and earning a Grammy nomination for her Precious Memories album, recorded for Savoy in 1968 (ibid., p. 196).

While many facets of Tharpe’s success and agency are remarkable, the focus of this chapter is her instrumental craft, or idiotechné, defined in part by a unique approach to playing both rhythm and lead guitar. Tharpe’s skill and singular approach to playing is frequently acknowledged, with Wald stating that Tharpe possessed “a guitar virtuosity that set her apart from any other performer of her era” (ibid., p. viii). In his seminal study on the history of gospel music, Anthony Heilbut acknowledges Tharpe’s playing, stating that in addition to her “sprightly vocals”, Tharpe’s “blues riffs on guitar” helped make her records the “biggest gospel hits of the 1930s” (2002 p.192). In addition to acknowledging her as

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117 In addition to gaining commercial success as a recording artist, during the early 1940s Tharpe featured in three soundies with the Lucky Millinder Orchestra. Tharpe was “the only black religious singer” (Heilbut, 2002 p. 192) to release V-Discs, morale-boosting recordings by popular artists produced by the United States government during the Second World War. In July 1951, in a spectacular marketing move, Tharpe married her third husband in a public wedding ceremony/music concert held in Washington DC’s Griffith Stadium in front of a crowd of twenty-two thousand paying fans (Buzelin 2004).
unique amongst her contemporaries, Andre Millard identifies Tharpe’s “explosive picking and innovative strumming” as the elements that “set her records apart” (2004, p. 24).

Tharpe’s career and unique position in the history of popular music has been the focus of some academic work, with Wald (2007) and Jackson (2004) providing much of the historical and biographical information used to support this study. Although Wald and Jackson both highlight Tharpe’s virtuosity and innovation, due to their focus, they do not closely analyse her idiotechne. In an essay entitled ‘Girls, Rock Your Boys: The Non-History of Women in Music’ (2008), musicologist Susan Fast also acknowledges Tharpe’s immense contribution to popular music history and her pioneering status as a female lead guitarist. Importantly, Fast also addresses what she describes as the exscription of Rosetta Tharpe from popular music history. Within the article, Fast analyses a guitar solo performed by Tharpe during a 1960s television appearance, tracing the influence of Tharpe’s musical and physical gestures through to later players. However, again due to its limitations, the essay only allows for a brief (yet compelling) assessment of her idiotechne.

Similarly, within the pedagogical sphere, there is a surprising dearth of material on Tharpe, with no identifiable published transcription sets or tutorial dvds. The lack of academic and popular media surrounding Tharpe, a player who as noted above, is widely considered one of the most influential players in the early contemporary popular music period, strongly supports the aim of this chapter, which is to identify and analyse Tharpe’s idiotechne.

4.1 Rosetta, the Guitar and Early Gospel

As a member of the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), a Pentecostal Christian denomination which developed in African-American communities during the early 20th century, Tharpe’s deep involvement in the church frames much of her early development as a musician. Music played an integral role during worship in COGIC congregations, with song and dance making up a “great portion” of the services (Heilbut 2002, p. 175). Wald elaborates,
stating that the church “interpreted Scripture to dictate that congregants ‘shout’ their faith, with everything from tambourines and drums, to trumpets and guitars” (2007 p. 10). Although women “were banned from official ordination and lay preaching” in the COGIC, they were allowed to participate as “evangelists, Sunday School instructors and music teachers” (ibid., p. 9), roles which Tharpe’s mother inhabited. When Rosetta was six years old, her mother left Cotton Plant to become a missionary for the church, eventually settling in Chicago, “where opportunities for missionary work were greater” than in the rural south (ibid., p. 14). Tharpe’s mother was a singer, and incorporated music making into her missionary’s. In Chicago, Tharpe and her mother became members of the 40th Street Church, one of the largest Pentecostal congregations in the United States, and one was steeped in musical tradition (ibid., p. 18). During the late 1920s and into the thirties, Rosetta and her mother continued to travel throughout the southern United States and the Midwest on the gospel circuit, performing at church conventions, tent revivals and even on street corners (Jackson 2004, p. 30). All accounts describe Rosetta as an outstanding singer and performer, but her guitar playing ability clearly set her apart from other musicians. Known as an “exceptional” player (Wald 2007, p.71) who allowed the guitar to “do both the singing and the talking for her” (ibid., p. 73), young Rosetta also used the instrument and her talent as an extension of her missionary work.

Tharpe described herself as being able to play music at the age of three, and by the time she moved to Chicago she “already played the guitar pretty well” (ibid., p. 19). Heilbut states that Tharpe had “mastered” (2002, p. 190) the guitar by the age of six and in a frequently cited anecdote, Tharpe is described as being placed on a piano or table in front of a large church audience at the age of six and “tearing up the place” (see Reitz 1988; Romanowski 1995). Scholar Jerma Jackson quotes a playbill which corroborates this same story, describing how “Rosetta had her first musical triumph at age six, with the guitar, which one of her gospel singing relatives taught her” (2004, p. 29). Jackson hypothesises that her mother may well have
been the gospel singing relative referred to in the above quote, and that Katie Nubin, who played mandolin and piano, was likely responsible for teaching Tharpe her “basic chords and techniques” (ibid.). Jackson’s hypothesis is informed by interviews conducted with Tharpe’s friends and family, and would certainly be congruent with the tenet that often the first musical experiences occur in the home, with the mother as first teacher (Evans, 2001). Considering Tharpe’s often cited close emotional ties with her mother, as well as their working/performing relationship, it is likely that Tharpe was deeply informed by her mother’s musical skill.\(^{118}\)

During her formative years living in the South, in addition to being immersed in music of the church, Tharpe would likely have been exposed to the blues, prevalent in the region during the 1920s. Wald states that “Mother Bell’s strictness limited Rosetta’s exposure to Chicago’s booming secular music scene in the mid-and late 1920s” (Wald 2007, p.22), but even within the church, popular and folk music were becoming increasingly absorbed into sacred music, “exemplified in the music of Dorsey” (ibid.). Thomas Dorsey, a former pianist for the blues queen Ma Rainey, had been a recording artist in his own right during the late 1920s, cutting the blues hit ‘It’s Tight Like That’ (Vocalion 1216) under the stage name Georgia Tom with guitarist Tampa Red in 1928. Dorsey went on to become one of Gospel music’s most prolific composers and arrangers during the 1930s, (Wald 2007). Also a resident of Chicago (Burnim 2015), Dorsey was considered a “leader of the Gospel-Blues movement” (Harris, M., 1994, p. xix), and incorporated the musical language of the blues and jazz idioms into traditional gospel material.\(^{119}\) With the idiom of the blues increasingly informing gospel styles, Tharpe would certainly have been influenced by the genre. Additionally, becoming a full-time street-preacher “sometime before her twelfth birthday” (Wald 2007, p. 26), it would seem entirely plausible that young Rosetta would “have overheard the sounds of early Chicago

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\(^{118}\) Heilbut and Wald both describe Tharpe’s personal turmoil after the loss of her mother (see Heilbut 2002, p. 189 and Wald 2007, p. 194-195), demonstrating a close emotional bond between the women. As well a spending numerous years on the road performing and evangelizing together before Tharpe’s commercial success in 1938, Tharpe and her mother continued to collaborate even at the height of Rosetta’s success, recording together in 1949 and 1950 (see Buzelin 2004).

\(^{119}\) For information on Dorsey’s background and stylistic development, see Harris, M. (1994).
blues” on the city’s streets (ibid.). As will be shown later, this influence is certainly identifiable in Tharpe’s guitar and vocal approach.

**Gospel, Blues and the Guitar-Evangelist Tradition**

While African-American communities have a long and rich history with vernacular religious folk songs and spirituals, during the 20th century the gospel genre developed into a formal and largely composed genre. Gospel historian Horace Boyer defines gospel “as a type of song and a style of piano playing” (Boyer 1979, p 22), and characterises the singing style as distinctive for its treatment of “timbre, range, text interpolation and improvisation, both melodic and rhythmic” (ibid., p. 23), and the piano style as mainly chordal and “heavily laced with syncopation” (ibid., p. 22). Boyer notes that during the early history of contemporary gospel, unaccompanied male groups were favoured, but female singers “entered the field” during the 1920s. He also notes that by the 1930s, female gospel groups had become popular, as had the practice of incorporating guitar, bass and piano accompaniment into the gospel quartet format (ibid.). During the recording boom of the early 1920s, sub-genres of sacred vocal music found on race record catalogues included sermons, jubilee and gospel quartets (Oliver 1984, p. 13). An identifiable sub-genre within the growing field of gospel recordings during the 1920s was that of the guitar-accompanied gospel singer. According to Paul Oliver (1984, p. 201), the first gospel-guitarist to record was Sam Jones in 1924, recording the song ‘Lord Don't You Know I Have No Friend Like You’ (Columbia 18925). On this record, Jones can be heard playing in a simple bass-strum style, using the guitar purely as accompaniment. As the genre developed during the 1920s, there became two identifiable streams; ‘guitar-evangelists’, usually ordained preachers who recorded religious songs, and blues musicians who ‘crossed-over’, recording gospel-influenced blues songs, capitalising on the growing

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120 Cusic corroborates this, stating “during the period 1926-29, when record labels were making field recordings, a large amount of gospel material was recorded” (2002, p. 54).
commercial popularity of the genre. Cusic indicates that gospel songs were being “recorded at the same time that early country and blues were recorded” (Cusic 2002, p. 54), often by many of the same artists, such as Memphis Minnie, who Heilbut described as including a “growling sermonette in her one religious recording”, released under the name of Gospel Minnie (2002, p. 358).

Although not the first to record in the style, Reverend Edward W. Claybourn’s billing as the “The Guitar Evangelist” gave the name to the genre (Romanawski 1992), with Claybourn recording over two-dozen guitar-accompanied gospel tracks in the late 1920s. While there is little information known about Claybourn (Oliver 1984), he can be heard on records such as ‘Your Enemy Cannot Harm You, But Watch Your Close Friend’ (Vocalion 1802, 1926), playing with a simple yet effective alternating bass-strum accompaniment style, and incorporating lead lines played with a slide on the treble strings, in response to his vocal line. Blind Willie Davis recorded gospel songs exclusively during the late 1920s, and on his 1928 version of the gospel standard ‘When the Saints Go Marching In’ (Paramount 12658), he can be heard playing in an open tuning, with driving alternating basses and a slide line played on the treble strings. Oliver remarks on Davis’ characteristic use of “forceful rhythms” (1984, p. 212), and a palpable sense of drive derived from constant rhythmic motion is certainly

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121 Romanowski (1995) uses the descriptor “black religious music with a rural feel” to describe the music of guitar evangelists, and Oliver uses the term “jack-leg preachers”. Oliver describes jack-leg preachers as “an important feature of religious life in the lower economic groups. Generally associated with the Sanctified movement, they sometimes attended regular services of the churches, seeking a chance to preach. More often they addressed spontaneous congregations in the streets, or endeavoured to start small store-front churches of their own” (1984, p. 200).

122 In 1925, Blind Lemon Jefferson, noted for his seminal early country blues recordings, cut two religious sides ‘I Want To Be Like Jesus In My Heart’ and ‘All I Want Is That Pure Religion’ (Paramount 12386) under the pseudonym Deacon LJ Bates (ibid., p.202). This practice of a secular bluesman cutting a record with a sacred text attests to the “crossing and re-crossing of sacred and secular lines” that both Gayle Wald and Paul Oliver identify as common within the genre. On the track ‘Pure Religion’, Jefferson demonstrates his characteristic East-Texas playing style, anchoring the accompaniment with a steady bass line, while embellishing with lead lines and call and response riffs. On the track ‘I Want To Be Like Jesus In My Heart’, Jefferson uses the guitar in an increasingly complex manner, incorporating tremolo technique and lead lines on the treble strings juxtaposed against steady alternating bass lines and moving bass runs. These songs can be considered an extension of Jefferson’s rural blues style, substituting secular lyrics for religious text. According to Oliver, it was common for many early traditional country blues artists to have recorded sacred titles as seen in the catalogue of artists such as Blind Lemon Jefferson and Charlie Patton (see Oliver, 1984, p. 203).

123 Memphis Minnie recorded two gospel sides for Decca in 1935, ‘Let Me Ride’ and ‘When the Saints Go Marching Home’ (Decca 7063). See chapter 3.
apparent on Davis’ recording. Considered “amongst the best known of the guitar evangelists” (Oliver 1984, p. 216), Blind Willie Johnson recorded over 30 records between 1927-1930. Johnson’s wife, Angeline, can often be heard singing with him on his records, and the duo make extensive use of the call and response vocal technique in their recordings124. In 1927, Johnson recorded ‘Nobody’s Fault But Mine’ (Columbia 14303), a song that Sister Rosetta would record in 1941. On Johnson’s 1927 version, he plays lead lines with a slide in open tuning, whilst playing alternating open basses. In a brief analysis of the song, Mark Makin describes it as a standard for “generations of ‘blues singers’ and Gospel singers alike”, and states that on his version, Blind Willie Johnson used his guitar “as an addition to his singing.” Makin further notes that Johnson “often plays instead of singing and completes unfinished vocal lines with a guitar phrase”, and that his “melodies run the complete length of the guitar neck, mostly up one string” (2014). As well as the connection in repertoire choice between Johnson and Tharp, Makin’s description of Johnson’s approach bears similarities to Tharpe’s approach, including the use of open tunings and the sense of drive within their accompaniments.

**1930s Gospel-Guitar Recordings**

The height of ‘sermon-and-song race recordings’ came during the mid to late 1920s, and by the early 1930s, the interest in such recordings was waning, due in part to the increased urbanization of black America, reflected in listening tastes shifting further toward more modern musical styles. This shift in taste also coincided with the economic depression of the 1930s, which resulted in massive cut backs in production across the recording industry (Ellis 2010). While commercial interest may have been on the decline, there were still a number of influential crossover singer/guitarists who recorded both sacred and secular music during the 1930s. These artists can be considered close contemporaries of Tharpe, one such musician

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124 An outstanding example of Blind Willie and Angeline Johnson’s vocal work can be heard on ‘John the Revelator’ (Columbia 14530, 1930).
being Blind Roosevelt Graves, who Oliver describes as a “songster who made several religious
titles” (1984, p. 205). Graves’ 1936 recording of ‘I Woke Up This Morning With My Mind On
Jesus’ (Melotone Records) demonstrates a spirited guitar accompaniment, played with
exceptional skill on a 12-string guitar. The guitar part features walking bass lines, moving
chord voicings and a solo break which deftly combines bass and melodic lines, imitating the
song’s vocal line, with added double-stops and bends. Perhaps one of the most recognized
guitar-evangelists to record both sacred and secular music during the 1930s was Reverend
Gary Davis, known for his “virtuosic Piedmont blues guitar style”, as well as versatile
repertoire which included “medicine show tunes, white ballads, military marches, country
instrumentals, [...] old church hymns, revival meeting and Gospel songs, popular tunes [and] original compositions based on all the above” (Evans, A., 2002). Robert Darden notes
similarities between the approach of Tharpe and Davis, stating, “like Rev. Gary Davis,
[Tharpe’s] guitar playing was aggressive and skillful, with strong blues overtones” (2004 p.
199).

While this discussion of Tharpe’s stylistic predecessors and closest contemporaries aims
to contextualize her within her genre, it is important to note the distinction in the level of
commercial success and visibility which separates Tharpe from many of the previously listed
guitar-evangelists and crossover singers. In Darden’s discussion of gospel-guitarists, he states
that Tharpe “soon became the most successful of all the guitar evangelists” (2004, p. 199.),
and unlike Graves or Davis, Tharpe was able to gain immense commercial crossover success
during the 1930s and forties, thereby entertaining and influencing musicians and audiences in
both black and white communities, during an era of social and musical segregation. While
Graves and Davis were influential proponents of the gospel-guitar style, Tharpe was able to
gain success and subsequently influence taste with an immediacy unlike that of a player such as
Davis, whose main recognition and commercial success came about within the context of the
1960s “folk and blues revival” (Ellis 2010, p. 1).
Notably, Tharpe had few female counterparts within the field of guitar evangelism, and certainly none who enjoyed similar commercial success. Jackson notes that, unlike preaching, music making within the church was an un-gendered activity (1995, p. 184), and while female vocalists were able to flourish within the gospel genre, there is a noticeable lack of female guitarists in the field. A brief analysis of the personnel listings on Document Records’ *Guitar Evangelists Vol. 1* (DOCD 5186) compilation exemplifies this gender disparity. The CD catalogues 26 gospel sides from the years 1928-1951 and features 10 separate acts, six of which include female vocalists, four of whom are lead vocalists. Yet only one of those women, Willie Mae Williams, accompanies herself on the guitar, on a side recorded during the 1950s. There is little biographical information available about Williams, who likely only recorded two songs in the early 1950s, ‘Where the Sun Never Goes Down’ and ‘Don't Want To Go There’ (Gothons 0624). On both sides, Williams can be heard playing guitar to accompany her vocals, using opening tunings and a slide. Another of the few female guitar-evangelists to record was Sister O.M. Terrell, born in 1911. Sister Terrell travelled as an itinerant evangelist for the Holiness Church during the 1930s and forties, but did not record until 1953, at which time she cut six sides for Columbia Records (Nemerov 2006). On her version of the gospel standard, ‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot’, Terrell can be heard playing in an opening tuning, with steady basses and busy slide lead lines, crafting a skillful and spirited guitar part.

While there is no documented information with regard to specific guitaristic influences upon Tharpe, one significant musical influence seems to have been that of Arizona Dranes (1894-1963), a pioneer of the gospel-piano style, and the first female gospel pianist to make a commercial recording (Johnson 2009, p. 134). Within the gospel music genre, the piano was considered “one of the primary, if not indispensable instruments” (ibid., p26), and in her

125 Jackson (2004, p. 39) identifies two other female guitar evangelists, Ann Bailey and Nancy Gamble, as does Gallagher & Lippard (2014, p. 486). Neither sources provide biographical information about these women, nor has it been possible to find any discographical information about them, so therefore it seems likely that they did not release any commercial recordings.

position as one of the early exponents of a new style of accompaniment, Dranes influenced many subsequent musicians. Johnson describes Dranes as a “trailblazing” figure, and notes that her “affiliation with the COGIC brought her in contact with a number of musicians and singers alike, many of whom she directly impacted” (ibid., p. 139). Wald, Heilbut and Jackson all describe Rosetta’s encounters with Dranes in Chicago, and later at COGIC convocations, as being pivotal in the evolution of Tharpes’ playing style (Heilbut 2002). Wald states, “Rosetta’s own style would come to bear the imprint of Dranes style, including her physical connections to her instrument” (2007, p. 25), and Jackson asserts, “Tharpe’s innovations become particularly evident in comparison with the work of Arizona Dranes. Anyone familiar with the recordings of both women can immediately hear the influence that Dranes’ bright vocals and infectious rhythms had on Tharpe” (2004, p. 89)\(^\text{127}\).

Born in Texas, likely of African-American and Mexican heritage, Dranes was blinded as a young girl by an outbreak of influenza and was subsequently enrolled in the *Texas Institute for Deaf, Dumb and Blind Coloured Youths* in Austin from 1896-1910, where she received her early musical training (Romanowski 1993). As a member of the COGIC, Dranes travelled throughout the mid-west and southern United States during the early 1920s, “serving as an accompanist and song leader” to various preachers (Johnson 2009, p. 133). Dranes was scouted by Okeh records, and in 1926 moved to Chicago to begin a recording career (ibid., p.134), cutting sixteen sides between 1926-1928\(^\text{128}\).

In his contemporary history of Gospel music, Darden describes Dranes as a “consummate performer” (2004, p. 145), defined by a combination of “electrifying singing and thumping, rhythm-fused piano playing” (ibid.). One could easily substitute Tharpe’s name

\(^{127}\) Wald also quotes gospel historian Horace Boyer who describes Dranes as the only other female musician in gospel who “rocked the world like Rosetta” (Boyer in Wald 2007, p. 25). Further, Oliver concludes an analysis of Dranes’ playing style by reinforcing how “undoubtedly, her influence was considerable” upon later gospel artists such a Tharpe (1984, p. 190).

\(^{128}\) According to Romanowski (1993) Dranes recorded 16 sides across four recording sessions between June 1926 and July 1928, two of which were unissued. Dranes is also possibly the pianist heard on two recordings by the Texas Jubilee Singers in 1928 and two by Rev. Joe Lenley in 1929.
and instrument in this description, with similarities between their respective approaches immediately apparent. In an in-depth analysis of Dranes’ style, Johnson describes her approach as a “fusion of religious, ragtime and barrelhouse techniques” (2009, p. 134), with a vocal style that was “strong, raucous and sonorous” (ibid., p. 133). Oliver also notes that Dranes’ “piano playing style was quite unlike that of pianists on previous sacred recordings: a mixture of ragtime and barrelhouse techniques with considerable rhythmic drive” (1984, p. 189). Jerma Jackson comments on the notably “fast tempo of [Dranes’] songs” in addition to her “clear, fiery vocals” (2004, p. 45-46). Similarly, Oliver notes a “remarkable thrust to [Dranes’] recordings on her vocals and in the instrumental choruses between verses” (1984, p.189).

While Tharpe’s idiotechne bears similarities to the approaches taken by guitar-evangelists and blues musicians who crossed-over from the sacred realm for commercial purposes during the 1920s and early 1903’s, there are also clear connections between Dranes’ playing and Rosetta Tharpe’s style. While the information presented in this section has aimed to uncover some of the possible influences upon the development of Tharpe’s playing, in addition to contextualising her amongst her contemporaries, by the time of her first recordings in 1938, Rosetta Tharpe had clearly developed an innovative and highly skilled approach to playing, which would prove to have a significant influence on the history of popular guitar playing.

129 Interestingly, Johnson notes that Dranes’ voicing of the “dominant 9th chord never utilises the 3rd” (2009, p. 208). This is a tenuous line of influence, but something that is often seen in Tharpe’s style.
4.2 Overview of Tharpe’s Recording Career and Physical Playing Style

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<th>Swing Band</th>
<th>Small Combo (Piano, Bass Drums)</th>
<th>Vocal Duo and Small Combo</th>
<th>Gospel Vocal Trio (no combo)</th>
<th>Organ Combo (Organ, piano, bass, drums)</th>
<th>Gospel Vocal Group and Combo</th>
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<td>Decca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb-56</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Decca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct-56</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Decca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.1 Overview of Tharpe’s recorded output from 1938-1956.
Between 1938 and 1956, Tharpe recorded exclusively for Decca Records, with figure 4.1 showing an overview of her sides recorded during these years. From 1938 – 1944, Tharpe recorded either solo sides or with a swing jazz band. All of her solo recordings from this time feature her playing the guitar; self-accompanying and playing lead breaks at the opening of songs, as well as between verses. Of the six sides recorded with the Lucky Millinder Orchestra in 1941-1942, Minnie is featured as a lead guitarist on three.\(^{130}\)

In 1944, Tharpe released her final set of solo sides for Decca, and between September 1944 and November 1947, she recorded mainly in a small combo format (with piano bass and drums). Some of these sides feature Tharpe in a vocal duo with Marie Knight and again, the majority feature Tharpe on guitar.

From 1947 until her last session for Decca in 1956, Tharpe recorded with a variety of ensembles including small combos, gospel vocal groups and an organ combo (organ, bass, drums). Many sides from this period feature Tharpe on lead guitar, and especially those recorded with a small combo, feature excellent examples of her lead abilities.\(^{131}\) A few sides from this period feature her only as a vocalist, for example her 1949 recordings of ‘Silent Night’ and ‘White Christmas’ with the James Roots Quartet and a gospel vocal group (Decca 48119). Additionally, some of the large combo recordings beginning around 1952 feature Rosetta singing, with other session players on guitar, including Jack Shook and Everett Barksdale on records such as ‘Old Landmark’ (Decca 9-28626, 1952) and ‘Look Away in the Heavenly Land’ (Decca 9-48332, 1954).

After her last recordings for Decca in 1956, Tharpe’s output turned mainly to LPs, as can be seen in figure 4.2. Various companies contracted Tharpe during this period, including

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\(^{130}\) Notably, during 1943 Tharpe can be heard performing eight separate songs on either AFRS Jubilee Broadcast or Victory discs. Tharpe recorded one song in January 1943 with Louis Jordan, two in January 1943 with Lucky Millinder, four more in August 1943 with Millinder, and one in late 1943 with the Noble Sissle Orchestra. On these eight recordings, Tharpe is featured as a guitar soloist on seven. Additionally, Tharpe recorded three ‘Soundies’ in 1941 with the Lucky Millinder Orchestra, however none of these feature her on guitar. For more information, see Wald 2007.

\(^{131}\) For example, her 1949 sides with the Sammy Price Trio (Decca 48119).
Mercury, Verve, Flame and Savoy Records. Additionally, Tharpe released live albums in 1960 and 1964, which show a consistently high level of skill and an idiotechne commensurate with that heard on her earliest recordings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recording Date</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Ensemble</th>
<th>Record Label</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jan-51</td>
<td>Blessed Assurance</td>
<td>Organ and Vocal Group</td>
<td>Decca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul-51</td>
<td>The Wedding Ceremony of Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Russell Morrison</td>
<td>Wedding Ceremony</td>
<td>Decca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul-56</td>
<td>Gospel Train</td>
<td>Organ Combo</td>
<td>Mercury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep-58</td>
<td>The Gospel Truth</td>
<td>Organ Combo</td>
<td>Mercury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Sister Rosetta Tharpe</td>
<td>Vocal Group and Organ Combo</td>
<td>Omega</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct-59</td>
<td>Sister Rosetta Tharpe</td>
<td>Choir and Organ Combo</td>
<td>MGM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Live in 1960</td>
<td>Solo Concert (Live)</td>
<td>Southland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr-61</td>
<td>Sister Rosetta Tharpe: Sister On Tour</td>
<td>Choir and Combo</td>
<td>Verve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec-61</td>
<td>Sister Rosetta Tharpe: The Gospel Truth</td>
<td>Choir and Organ Combo</td>
<td>Verve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct-64</td>
<td>Live in Paris, 1964</td>
<td>Solo Concert (Live)</td>
<td>Esoldun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov-66</td>
<td>Hot Club du France Concerts</td>
<td>Solo Concert (Live)</td>
<td>Flame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Precious Memories</td>
<td>Organ Combo (Live)</td>
<td>Savoy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As seen in the above figures, Tharpe demonstrated great versatility as a recording artist across her career, with her lead guitar a consistent feature of most of her recordings. Tharpe’s idiotechne demonstrated on these recordings is difficult to directly compare to any of her predecessors or contemporaries discussed earlier in this chapter. When compiling a list of excepted norms within the 1930s gospel and gospel-blues genres, characteristics identified by Boyer (1979) and Oliver (1984) include the use of percussive, chordal accompaniments laced with syncopation, in addition to up-beat and intense rhythms. Shearon describes the gospel genre as “characterized by simple, major-key melodies with a correspondingly simple harmonic vocabulary, primarily I, IV, and V chords, occasionally flavoured […] with chromatic passing tones” (2012). With the development of the gospel-blues sub-genre during the 1920s, as well as the crossover influence of blues guitarists who turned to gospel

Figure 4.2 Tharpe’s L.P. output from 1951-1968.
recordings during the height of the recording period, the gospel-guitar vocabulary was infused with pentatonicism and the use of riffs, as seen in the music of Rev. Gary Davis (Ellis, 2010)\(^\text{132}\). Somatic norms, including the use of a slide and opening tunings are identified by Ellis, amongst both guitar-evangelists and cross-over blues players, in addition to the use of string bending, hammer-ons, and varied tones.

Figure 4.3  Stylistic norms in early gospel and gospel-blues guitar playing.

Through the corpus analysis undertaken in this chapter, it is evident that Tharpe engaged with many of the expected norms of the gospel-guitar style including use of open tunings, up-beat and intense rhythms, and percussive and driving chordal accompaniments that were laced with syncopation. However, close analysis of her playing also identifies a

\(^{132}\) Ellis states that the height of popularity of gospel-blues was the mid-1920s, when gospel artists were “outselling even Bessie Smith, then-queen of blues recordings” (2012, p. 59).
number of idiotechniques, allowing us to more closely define her idiotechne. Those include a harmonically active approach to comping, reliance upon master chord shapes and riffs, recurrent musical and performative gestures, and the use of chord mapping and master pitch regions when playing lead. Additionally, Tharpe demonstrates the use of angular melodic profiles with an emphasis on rescissory motion, enhanced use of chromaticism and pentatonic cells, with chordal integration within linear passages.\(^\text{133}\)

Before engaging in a close analysis of Tharpe’s idiotechne, a brief assessment of her physical playing style is necessary. Video recordings of a number of Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s performances during the 1960s have been analysed for this section, in order to define the specific nuances of her technical approach. Perhaps the most well-known footage of Tharpe are two appearances on the U.S. television programme called *TV Gospel Time*, filmed in 1962 and 1963.\(^\text{134}\) During these appearances, Tharpe performed two songs, ‘Up Above My Head’ and ‘Down By The Riverside’, supported by a gospel choir and an off-stage piano. A second video of Tharpe playing ‘Up Above my Head’, likely from this same time period, shows Tharpe playing an abbreviated solo guitar and vocal arrangement of the same song.\(^\text{135}\) Tharpe also recorded a two-song set for a British television programme, *Blues and Gospel Train*, in 1964. During this period, Tharpe had been touring the United Kingdom on *The American Folk, Blues and Gospel Caravan* tour with a number of musicians including Muddy Waters, Rev. Gary Davis and Otis Spann and during the tour, the musicians participated in a staged performance on a disused train station platform in front of live audience (Wald 2007). At this performance Tharpe played ‘Didn’t It Rain’ and ‘Trouble in Mind’ accompanied by a small combo. There are a number of other videos available of Tharpe performing live in concert in Europe during

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\(^{133}\) In this context of this study, the term rescissory is used to describe melodic motion that constantly reverses direction.

\(^{134}\) Buzelin states “in 1962 and 1963 [Tharpe] was invited by NBC Television to appear on the programme *TV Gospel Time*, but a specific date is not available. (Buzelin 2012).

\(^{135}\) It has not been possible to source the exact date of this video, but likely comes from the same period as the *TV Gospel Time* videos. In this video, Tharpe is playing Gibson Barney Kessel model guitar, which were produced from 1961. This video in particular has provided much of the base evidence for an informed analysis of Tharpe’s right hand approach.
the later 1960s that have also been analysed in order to inform the discussion of her physical approach. While all of these videos were recorded over two decades into Tharpe’s recording career, an assessment of her earliest audio recordings demonstrates a reliance on the same fundamental elements of technique and musical vocabulary that she demonstrates in these videos.

In each of the above listed videos, Tharpe plays with a pick on her right hand thumb, and consistently demonstrates a number of recurrent right hand techniques. First, when strumming chords, she plays with $i$ and $m$ finger, down and up strums. However, when wanting to emphasise certain accompanimental chords, she strums with her thumb pick, adding energy and intensity in those chosen moments. Additionally, Tharpe played her lead lines and single line riffs with her thumb pick, in an all up-stroke pattern. Tharpe herself noted the unusual nature of her right hand lead approach, stating “I pluck the strings upwards, and not downwards as guitarists generally do” (Tharpe in Buzelin 2004). What is perhaps most notable is the consistent up-stroke motion with her thumb, often at elevated tempos, demonstrating a high level of technical ability and control.

Tharpe displays a relatively standard left hand approach, and her technique can be described as efficient, facilitating clean chord changes and supporting speed and accuracy in her lead lines, which are often played at high tempos with frequent chromaticism, string-crossing and rapid position changes. While comping, Tharpe plays mainly in first position, with chords primarily voiced on the top four strings, with her lead lines falling mainly on the top three strings. Tharpe plays with a close grip in the left hand, with her thumb often over the neck, which she utilises to facilitate left hand thumb-damping on the lower strings when necessary. Tharpe employs a simple chord vocabulary (vocabulary will be discussed in depth later in this chapter), but constantly colours her progressions by adding chord tones to her

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136 In this same interview, Tharpe also she confirms that she always played with a thumb pick.
137 An excellent example of Tharpe’s right-hand approach can be seen on the following video; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YO3nmGj-pWA (Accessed 16 March 2018).
simple voicings, which results in her left hand rarely remaining static whilst playing even the most simple of progressions\textsuperscript{138}. Although her left hand is constantly active, what is noticeable is that she maintains an efficient left hand position when playing chords, demonstrating little vertical movement from the fretboard. Tharpe seems to rarely engage her 4\textsuperscript{th} finger, perhaps due to the lack of necessity, given her chosen chord voicings, and when not in use, her 4\textsuperscript{th} finger is well controlled.

When switching to playing lead lines, more vertical movement is evident in her left hand, especially in 3\textsuperscript{rd} and 4\textsuperscript{th} fingers, yet she consistently maintain speed and accuracy\textsuperscript{139}. The use of bends is a fundamental element of both Tharpe’s comping and lead approaches, often utilising bent notes in her solos for colour, as well as bending chord tones

\textsuperscript{138} For a visual example see the following video from 2:05 onwards; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JeaBNAXfHfQ (Accessed 16 March 2018).
\textsuperscript{139} For a visual example see the following video; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xzt_GB8qk (Accessed 16 March 2018).
when comping. She again uses the ‘over the neck’ position of her left hand thumb for leverage, in order to effectively push bent notes across the fingerboard, frequently bending with her 3rd finger while holding chord tones with her 1st and 2nd finger. Tharpe often uses single and double-stop slides in her lead lines, and when doing so, continues to maintain the ‘over the neck’ position of her left hand thumb when sliding into notes, often playing 3-fret double-stop reaches with her first and second finger. Tharpe’s musical incorporation of each these devices will be discussed in-depth later in this chapter.

In early publicity photos, Tharpe can be seen playing a Gibson L-5 archtop acoustic, in addition to a National steel-bodied resonator. Her tone on early records is consistently bright. In her later career, publicity photos and video show Tharpe playing a variety of Gibson electric guitars, including a Custom SG and Les Paul, as well as a semi-solid ES-335 and Barney Kessel Custom model, and a semi-solid Gretsch. Each of these guitars has a characteristic sound, and feature various pick-up configurations. Tharpe’s creative engagement with tonal variation and an increasing use of sustain and distortion available through the use of the electric guitar is evident on her later recordings, and as will be shown later, to be a vital facet of her idiotechne.

Tuning

All of Tharpe’s recordings and videos show her playing in Vestapol tuning, in which the guitar strings are tuned from low to high, R5R35R in relation to a major scale. This tuning creates a major chord across the open strings, allowing the bass strings to drone resonantly whilst fretting chords or playing melodic lines on the treble strings. This tuning also allows relatively simple fretting of the I, IV and V chords in first position, which form the backbone

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140 For a visual example of Tharpe’s left-hand approach when incorporating these devices, see the following video from 2:14 on; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NFywQdeKSo (Accessed 16 March 2018).
141 This tuning is sometimes referred to as ‘open D tuning’ or ‘Vestapol’, a name derived from the title of a well-known guitar piece from the 1800s written in this tuning. See Devi (2006, p. 226-7) for a longer discussion of the origins of Vestapol tuning.
142 ‘Let That Liar Alone’ (Decca 48023, 1943) is a fine example of Tharpe’s use of drone basses while playing a lead line on the treble strings.
of Tharpe’s harmonic vocabulary. While D major was perhaps the most commonly used key for Vestapol tuning amongst blues and gospel-blues players (see Memphis Minnie chapter), Tharpe’s choice of sounding key ranged from as low as Bb up to Db, achieved through relative re-tuning, or the use of a capo.

As can be seen in figure 4.5, all of Tharpe’s solo recordings from 1938 – 1944 are played in Bb vestapol tuning, with the exception of three, which are played in B vestapol;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recording Date</th>
<th>Solo</th>
<th>Swing Band</th>
<th>Tuning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oct-38</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan-39</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar-41</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun-41</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep-41</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 (no guitar on 2nd)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov-41</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec-41</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun-42</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov-43</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec-43</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr-44</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>28</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.5   Key and tuning data for Tharpe’s recordings from 1938-1944.

As can be seen in figure 4.6, Tharpe participated in her first ensemble recording session in September 1944, and in a variety of combo sessions from 1944 - July 1949. On these recordings Tharpe’s guitar is featured consistently;
As Tharpe began to play with a variety of different groups, she began to record in a variety of sounding keys, as seen in figure 4.6, yet on these recordings Tharpe’s guitar is still always tuned in the Vestapol intervalllic tuning.

On her Decca sessions from 1949 onwards, Thapre’s recordings with larger groups sometimes do not feature her on guitar, only singing. Additionally, some records from this period featuring a session guitarist\(^\text{143}\). On the recordings where her guitar does feature, again she is always playing in Vestapol, typically in Bb, B or C. In later recordings and performance videos, Tharpe often plays in C or Db major tuning\(^\text{144}\). While it seems that Tharpe’s preferred sounding key may have been Bb, due to the frequency of that key on her earliest solo records, the variation in sounding key later in her career was likely governed by whom she was working with at the time. As previously stated, Tharpe recorded a number of sides in the 1940s with Sam Price, the house pianist and producer for Decca Records. In his autobiography, Price

\(^{143}\) The songs on which Tharpe does not play guitar are typically the more religiously oriented recordings from this period.

\(^{144}\) In the solo guitar and voice video version of ‘Up Above My Head’, Tharpe is tuned to open C while songs performed on the TV Gospel Time and the Blues and Gospel Train programmes are played in the key of Db.
gave his opinion of Tharpe’s approach to tuning, stating that she “tuned her guitar funny, and sang in the wrong key” (1989, p. 52). He describes directing Tharpe to “move her capo, and get the guitar in the right key…with a capo on the fret it would be a better key, the right key to play along with” (ibid.). On the first record Tharpe cut with Price in 1944 ‘Strange Things Happening Everyday’ (Decca 8669), she can be heard playing in C Vestapol, which would be congruent with tuning to Bb, with a capo at the second fret\(^{145}\).

### 4.3 Tharpe as a Rhythm Player

Throughout her recording career, Sister Rosetta Tharpe demonstrated a highly consistent and effective approach to accompaniment. As previously noted, early 20\(^\text{th}\) century gospel song could be “characterized by simple, major-key melodies with a correspondingly simple harmonic vocabulary, primarily I, IV, and V chords” (Shearon 2012). In line with this description, a preponderance of Rosetta Tharpe’s songs are played in major keys featuring only I, IV and V chords. Many of her recorded songs were arrangements of gospel standards or newly composed works by Tharpe herself, which are clearly informed by the gospel tradition. Shearon goes on to state that the use of strophic or verse-refrain forms was prevalent in African-American gospel music and Anthony Heilbut describes the 16-bar blues form as being so common in African-American gospel, that he dubs it the “Baptist Blues” (2002, p. xxi). Congruent with these assessments, Tharpe’s songs are frequently structured in 12 or 16 bar verse and verse/refrain forms.

The harmonic form of the verse in ‘Rock Me’ (Decca 2243), Tharpe’s first recorded side in 1938, demonstrates this convention;

\(^{145}\) While Price’s comments about Tharpe could be interpreted as negative, he also describes Tharpe and Marie Knight’s ‘Precious Memories’ (Decca 48070, 1947) as one of the top ten favourite records he produced (Price 1989, p. 79).
As seen in figure 4.7, ‘Rock Me’ features a 16-bar verse, using only I, IV and V chords. The chorus is also based on 16-bar form, but features creative engagement with the form, extending the 4-bar hypermeter in the third phrase an additional 2 bars (bars 29-30). Some of Tharpe’s later combo recordings engage with ragtime forms (similar to that seen in the earlier
exploration of Memphis Minnie’s music), such as the song ‘Strange Things Happening Every Day’ (Decca 8669, 1944);

As seen in figure 4.8, the ragtime-derived harmonic form of ‘Strange Things’ features mainly I, IV and V chord harmonies, with secondary dominant chords in bar 12 and 13. Tharpe’s approach to comping on this song includes playing chords during the I, IV and V bars, then switching to single-line fills during bars 12 and 13, effectively by-passing the non-diatonic harmonies. This is likely due to secondary-dominant chords being relatively unidiomatic to play in Vestapol tuning. Similarly, in 1944 Tharpe recorded one side in the key of C minor (see figure 4.6). Her approach on that record is to again bypass the diatonic minor chords (unidiomatic in vestapol tuning), simply playing repeated responsorial unison pitches during the sung verses instead.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶The song that features Tharpe playing guitar in the key of C minor is ‘Two Little Fishes and Five Loaves of Bread’ recorded with the Sam Price Trio (Decca 8669, 1944).
While Tharpe’s primary chord vocabulary is relatively limited, she does rely upon a
group of master chord shapes, fundamental to Vestapol tuning. Her master shapes of the I, IV and V7 chord are simple voicings in first position, as follows;

![Master Chords Diagram](image)

Figure 4.9  Tharpe's master I, IV and V chords in Vestapol tuning.

When using these shapes, Tharpe often only plays the top four strings of the chord, which allows for clean voice-leading between chord tones. Here is where she would likely use her left hand thumb to damp strings 5 and 6, where desired. At times she incorporates the open bass strings, which result in rich, full texture during those bars. Noticeable is the ‘open’ quality of her master V chord voicing, due to the missing 3rd. Tharpe frequently embellished her master I and IV chords with dominant 7th extensions, and used a 7th position I chord (type 3) to add variety to tonic chord passages. This upper-form I chord voicing is often heard at the start of a phrase or verse, providing contrast at the beginning of a new section. Tharpe also plays alternative versions of the V7 chord in first position, as shown in figure 4.10;

![Chord Variants Diagram](image)

Figure 4.10  Tharpe's I, IV and V7 chord variants in Vestapol tuning.

Tharpe’s variants of the V7 chord can be analysed as extended voicings, but rather, are likely the result of simply moving the 3rd finger within the master shape, for variety.
These master chord voicings and variants can be seen in use in the verse of ‘Rock Me’ (Decca 2243), the first song recorded by Tharpe at her initial session for Decca in 1938;
As shown in figure 4.11, Tharpe deploys multiple versions of her I, IV and V chords during the verse, constantly changing voicings for interest, such as cycling type 1 and type 2 I7 chords during bars 1-2. In bar 9, she plays a type 3 I chord in 7th position, for registral contrast. As can be seen in bar 15, Tharpe adds a single chromatic line fill, which functions as
a response gesture to the final sung line of her vocals. The interjection of single lines, a common feature of Tharpe’s approach to comping, can be heard in use across her catalogue.

The song ‘Up Above My Head, I Hear Music in the Air’ (Decca 74154-A), was first recorded by Tharpe in 1947, and features her singing a vocal duet with Marie Knight, accompanied by the Sammy Price Trio. In the Decca recording, Tharpe plays a short 4-bar lead introduction, comping through the verses and playing a full solo after the second verse. She employs master chords and variants, and interjects single-line responsorial fills during the verses. A 1960s video recording of Tharpe playing the song in an acoustic setting, her and guitar alone, allows a visual assessment of Tharpe comping, and also demonstrates her using a consistent approach, now much later in her career. During the introduction solo and first verse of the performance, the camera is focused on Tharpe’s right hand, providing an unencumbered view of her technique. Although brief, the video showcases the fundamental elements of Tharpe’s right hand style. Figure 4.12 shows a transcription of this performance, with right hand annotations:\(^{147}\);

\(^{147}\) This video can be viewed here; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YO3nmGj-pWA (Accessed 16 March 2018).
Figure 4.12  Sister Rosetta Tharpe, ‘Up Above My Head’ (Solo guitar and voice version, 1960s).  
Verse 1 with annotation of right-hand fingerings and call and response.
Structured in a 16-bar blues form, phrases 1 and 2 (bars 1-8) of the first verse feature an alternating call and response structure, with Tharpe singing a brief line, accompanied with chords in the guitar part, then switching the guitar function to single-line lead, in response to the previous vocal statement. In phrases 3 and 4, Tharpe sings a more dense vocal line, with no ‘empty’ bars for guitar response, so here, her guitar functions in an accompanimental role only, until the penultimate bar of the verse, where she plays a single-line riff in response to the end of the vocal line. Through the chord passages, she draws on her master chord variants, and again plays her riffs in first position, facilitating a quick transition from comping to lead.

As can be seen in the right-hand annotations in figure 4.12, during single-line passages, Tharpe plays with her thumb, all up-strokes. Chords are strummed with the fingers, often featuring an i up-down, m up-down pattern (see bars 9-14).

**Minor Sub-Dominant Substitutions**

While Tharpe’s chord vocabulary is fundamentally reliant upon the use of I, IV and V chords in a major key, Tharpe often employed minor sub-dominant chords, borrowing from the parallel minor, in order to colour a phrase. This can be seen in the verse of ‘This Train’ (Decca 64882), a solo side recorded by Tharpe in 1939.
This train is a clean train, this train.

This train is a clean train, this train.

This train is a clean train, this train.
As can be seen in figure 4.13, Tharpe employs the minor sub-dominant chord in bar 12 as a passing chord between the subdominant and tonic chords. In addition to functioning as a substitute harmony, this gesture adds a brief, yet effective chromatically descending \(^{6}\)-b6-\(^{5}\) melodic figure (in relation to the home key) on the 2\(^{nd}\) string, when moving from IV-iv-I, in bars 12-13. Notably, in relation to Shearon’s description of the normative use of only primary
diatonic chords in Gospel music, with this device, Tharpe breaks convention. It is asserted here that Tharpe ‘borrowed’ this convention from the standard Swing jazz vocabulary.\(^{148}\)

The analysis of these songs elucidates the fundamentals of Tharpe’s approach to comping, which can be considered an ‘active’ approach, due to the employment of multiple chord variants. Additionally, Tharpe’s guitar assumes a number of functions, via engagement with the fundamental trope of call and response, similar to that seen in the analysis of Memphis Minnie and Maybelle Carter.

**Shuffle Patterns**

As can be seen in the previous transcriptions, the activity within Tharpe’s comping is also intensified by the incorporation of shuffle pattern and chord-tone bends. The identification of these devices again supports the definition of Tharpe having an active approach to accompaniment. Returning to figure 4.12, in the transcription of Tharpe’s guitar part in her solo performance of ‘Up Above My Head’, during bars 9-12, Tharpe adds a \(^5\)-\(^6\) shuffle figure to the top voice of her I and IV chords. According to Rubin, the characteristic shuffle pattern of an oscillating 5-6 chord tone above a static root note was likely “invented by delta blues guitarists” (1995, p. 5). This moving bass-line concept was soon transformed into walking bass-lines by ‘Boogie- Woogie’ pianists, whose popular 1920s style of “instrumental blues-based music … center[ed] around a continuous, ostinato bass pattern in the left-hand – known as the shuffle beat” (Johnson 2009, p. 200). Tharpe may have been introduced to this technique through the influence of Arizona Dranes whose gospel piano style, as previously noted, “was reminiscent of the Texas barrelhouse and fast boogie-woogie piano music” (ibid, p. 133).

Similar to bars 9-12 in ‘Up Above My Head’ (figure 4.12), shuffle figures are frequently found in the top voice of Tharpe’s master chord shapes. She sometimes added a ‘double’

\(^{148}\) Mulholland and Hojnaki (2013) assert that in standard jazz vocabulary “sub-dominant minor chords replace major key sub-dominant chords, or serve as variations of them” (2013, p. 18).
chord-tone shuffle within her type 1 tonic chord, often during extended phrases of tonic chord harmony. This can be identified in the song ‘Strange Things Happening Every Day’ (Decca 8669, 1944), recorded with a piano combo in 1944, where Tharpe plays a double chord-tone shuffle in bars 1-3 during the first verse;
Figure 4.14  Rosetta Tharpe with the Sam Price Trio ‘Strange Things Happening Every Day’ (Decca 8669, 1944. Track time 0:14-0:38), Verse 1 with annotation of double-shuffle pattern.

As can be seen in figure 4.14, Tharpe double-shuffles the 5-6 and 3-4 chord tone within the I chord during bars 1-3. While this double shuffle pattern could also be analysed as a double suspension or a complete change of harmony, (oscillation of a I – IV (6/4) chord), the resultant feel is one of movement, adding drive to a simple harmonic progression. Tharpe often modifies the rhythm in shuffle passages from a straight alternating quaver pattern to a syncopated rhythmic pattern, again demonstrating further rhythmic interest within these passages. This can be seen in bar 10 of the ‘Rock Me’ transcription (figure 4.11). In bar 9 of the verse, Tharpe plays with a swung-quaver rhythm, alternating the shuffle on the main beat of the bar. In bar 10, she plays a quaver pair on beat 1 and 3, with a triplet shuffle on beat 2, creating a moment of metric dissonance.

These constant shuffle embellishments are typical of Tharpe’s idiotechne, and support the previous statement describing Tharpe as a ‘busy’ player, both physically and musically. Her left hand is rarely static whilst comping, constantly colouring and embellishing her simple I, IV, V progressions.
Chord Tone Bends

Another characteristic facet of Tharpe’s active comping approach is the addition of single-note bends on one voice of a chord, often the top voice. She incorporates ‘micro-bends’ (¼ tones), or half tone bends, rarely pushing the bend to a full tone\textsuperscript{149}. These bends, on the top voice of chords, create melodic fills that often occur in a call-and-response manner in relation to Tharpe’s vocal lines. Again, in these instances, Tharpe is briefly combining both rhythm and lead, with her guitar operating in a multi-functional capacity. While these frequent gestures are brief in nature, they often present as nuanced counter-melodies, embedded within accompanimental passages.

Consistently heard is a $^\flat 3-^\flat 2-^\flat 1$ bend gesture in the top voice of both her type 1 tonic and V7 chord shapes, identifiable in the first verse of the song ‘That's All’ (Decca 2503, 1938), a solo side recorded by Tharpe at her first session in 1938;

\textsuperscript{149} See Evans (1982) for a discussion on use of micro-tonality in the blues.
I wanna tell you the natural fact, that a man don't understand that bi--

ble now, and that's all

But he better have relig-ion now,
As can be seen in figure 4.15 in bar 2 of the verse to ‘That’s All’, Tharpe adds a 2 on the first string, then bends it up a semitone, twice, to the b3, releasing the bend to the 2 on beat 4, then un-fretting the 2 on the last quaver of the bar, culminating the figure on the 1. This bend-fill functions to embellish the type 1 tonic chord, creating a short counter-melody on top of the underlying harmony. In bar 11, Tharpe, plays an equivalent chord-tone bend figure over a type 1 V7 chord. Bend-fills of this nature are heard throughout Tharpe’s accompaniments, and can often be heard in a number of rhythmic iterations.

Other variants of this three note bend-fill are used throughout her catalogue, such as a harmonic b3-2-1 over a V chord harmony, seen in ‘Rock Me’, verse 1, bars 7 and 8 (figure 4.11). Here, Tharpe adds the bend on an inside voice, on the second string, resulting in a moving line within a static harmony. Another fill, seen in bar 5 of ‘That’s All’ (figure 4.15, can be heard as a harmonic b7-6-5 bend played in the top voice of the type 1 IV chord.

Tharpe often combines a type 1 tonic chord bend fill and a type 1 V7 chord in order to create an extended bend figure that functions as a cadential embellishment, creating a turn-around fill which provides propulsion toward the end of a verse or chorus, as seen in ‘That’s All’, bar 12 (figure 4.15). When combined with the preceding type 1 V7 bend-fill in bar 11, this extended fill (bars 11-12) functions similarly to the sign-off riff employed by Memphis Minnie.
Additional frequently heard embellishing gestures occur around the type 1 tonic chord, often during the resolution of a perfect cadence at the end of a phrase or section. As can be seen in figure 4.16 (A), the gesture employs a simple descending \(^b7-^6-^5\) line played on the 2\(^{nd}\) string, within a type 1 tonic chord shape;

![Figure 4.16](image)

This gesture again often functions as a sign-off riff, and can be heard in the final bars of songs such as ‘Precious Lord, Hold My Hand (Decca 69981, 1941), where Tharpe re-iterates the gesture twice before the final tonic chord in the last bar of the song.

Additional type 1 tonic chord embellishing gestures, heard often in Tharpe’s early recordings include a variant of a slide into the 5\(^{th}\) degree of the chord played, on the 3\(^{rd}\) string, seen in figure 4.16 (B and C) Again, Tharpe frequently employs these gestures at cadence points, such as during the final bars of ‘Bring Back Those Happy Days’ (Decca 64881, 1939), ‘I Looked Down the Line (and I Wondered)’ (Decca 64883, 1939) and ‘God Don’t Like It’ (Decca 64884, 1939), where each functions as a sign-off gesture.

While the analysis in this section has focused on Tharpe’s approach to comping from a micro-perspective, the following lexicon of frequently used chords and embellishments gestures, catalogues said gestures, in order to give a macro-perspective of her approach;
Tharpe’s reliance on the chord shapes and gestures seen in the lexicon in figure 4.17 is highly systematic, and the unity of these gestures heard across her catalogue, once identified, makes Tharpe’s approach unmistakable.

Returning to the song ‘Rock Me’ (Decca 2243, 1938), a close analysis of the first verse shows the guitar part to be constructed entirely of Tharpe’s idiomatic gestures as compiled in

Figure 4.17  Lexicon of Tharpe’s master chords and embellishing gestures.
the previous lexicon, including master chords shapes (red) and embellishing gestures such as bend-fills and shuffle chords (green);
Figure 4.18 Sister Rosetta Tharpe ‘Rock Me’ (Decca 2243, 1938. Track time 0:07 - 0:34). Verse 1 with annotation of master chord shapes and embellishing gestures.

As can be seen in figure 4.18 the verse of ‘Rock Me’ is structured in a 16-bar form, broken into four, 4-bar phrases. During the first phrase (bars 1-4), Tharpe plays type 1.1 tonic and IV chord shuffle gestures, with a type 1.2 bend gesture over the IV chord in bar 4. In phrase two, she begins with a type 2 I7 chord, then moves into a type 1.1 I7 chord shuffle,
followed by a 1.2 type V7 bend. Tharpe starts the 3rd phrase, jumping to a type 3.1 tonic chord shuffle gesture in 7th position, before returning to IV chord shuffle and bend gestures (type 1.1 and 1.2) in 1st position, in bars 11-12. During the final phrase of the verse, Tharpe uses first position shuffle and bend gestures over type 1 tonic and V7 chords in bar 13 and 14. The final vocal phrase of the verse ends on the downbeat of bar 15, and here Tharpe plays a full bar single-line fill, driving toward the cadence in bar 16, which she reinforces with a type 1 tonic and type 3 I7 chord shuffle.

Recordings from the 1950s and 1960s continue to show Tharpe drawing on these same master chords and gesture, exemplified in the following analysis of a live performance of the song ‘Up Above My Head’ from the TV Gospel Time television programme filmed in the early 1960s. The annotations in figure 4.19 show Tharpe’s continued reliance on stock musical gestures, now over two decades after her initial recordings were made;

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See appendix D, figure D.1 transcription for an additional example of Tharpe’s systematic use of accompaniment embellishing gestures, during verse 1 of the song ‘That’s All’ (Decca 2503, 1938).
Up above my head... I hear music in the air...

Tuning: C Vestapol

I (type 1)

I (type 1.1)

I (type 1)

V7 (type 1.2)

V7 (type 1)
Figure 4.19  Sister Rosetta Tharpe, ‘Up Above My Head’ (TV Gospel Time programme, c. 1962-3). Verse 1 with annotation of master chord shapes and embellishing gestures.
Although some 20 years or more into her recording career, the transcription in figure 4.19 of a Tharpe performance from the 1960s shows a continued reliance upon master shapes and musical gestures fundamental to her vocabulary, with added bend-fills for interest. In bar 15, Tharpe plays a single-line fill, in response to her sung vocal line.

The analysis undertaken in this section has aimed to elucidate the consistent nature of Tharpe’s approach to accompaniment across her catalogue. It demonstrates Tharpe’s ability to infuse a simple chord vocabulary with interest, through incorporating varied chord voicing’s, gestures and fills, leading to a dynamic and active comping profile. The use of continuous activity, often in the highest voice of chords results in a nuanced, multifunctional approach to comping, subtly combining rhythm and lead. Additionally, Tharpe’s incorporation of brief single-line call and response gestures locates her squarely within the gospel and blues musical tradition, whilst incorporating her own idiotechne.

### 4.4 Tharpe as a Lead Player

Similar to when comping, Tharpe’s approach to playing lead was highly systematic, and can be defined by a number of tendencies, including a reliance on master pitch regions and chord mapping, the use of recurrent riffs and cells, angular melodic profiles with an emphasis on rescissory motion, double-stops and chordal integration.

Many of these components can be identified in the opening solo for ‘Rock Me’ (Decca 2243) recorded at Tharpe’s first session in 1938;
Figure 4.20  Sister Rosetta Tharpe ‘Rock Me’ (Decca 2243, 1938. Track time 0:00-0:07). Opening solo with annotation of melodic cells and contour.

As seen in figure 4.20, Tharpe begins the brief solo with a gesture mapped over the type 3 tonic chord shape in 7th position, before dropping down to 1st position, where she plays a descending $^\flat 3-^\flat 2-^\flat 1$ triplet cell, immediately reversing the direction of the line, playing an ascending $^5-^6-^1$ triplet cell, then reversing direction again, and playing a descending octave line that incorporates both major and blues pentatonic scale pitches. Tharpe shifts from triplets to swung quavers whilst descending the octave, before she deposits the line into an open type 1 tonic chord on the downbeat of bar 3. She follows the busy opening bars with a vamp on a master tonic and V7 chord, using a type 1.1 V7 bend riff for embellishment in bar 3.

Although brief, there are a number of integral recurrent musical gestures identifiable within this solo. The $^5-^6-^1$ triplet cell found in bar 1, beat 4 can be heard frequently as a single-note riff in verse accompaniments, in addition to being a component of many of her lead breaks\textsuperscript{151}. This diatonic cell is often used to re-enforce tonic chord harmony, as seen in the ‘Rock Me’ example, but is also often heard leading in to, or during, V7 chord bars, where

\textsuperscript{151} See ‘That’s All’ verse 1, bar 7 (figure 4.15) for an example of incorporation during a verse.
it functions as a harmonic ^1-^2-^4, often connecting to the top voice (^5) of a type 1 V7 chord. Tharpe frequently plays the cell with a hammer-on between the 1st and 2nd note of the riff, creating drive. Similarly, the ^b3-^2-^1 triplet cell seen in this short solo is a common component of her lead vocabulary, analogous to the ^b3-^2-^1 bend-fill often used to embellish the type 1.1 tonic and V7 chords.

Notably, the rescissory nature of these two cells used in conjunction in bar 1, creates a sense of tension in the line, further extended through a repetition of the ^b3-^2-^1 cell at the beginning of bar 2. Here, Tharpe has now changed the direction of the line three times within three beats, a musical device that will be shown to be characteristic of her lead approach.

After the disjunct nature of the line in bar 1, Tharpe plays a conjunct descending line in bar 2, constructed from a ^b3-^2-^1 triplet cell on beat 1 (played on the 1st string), a ^b7-^6-^5 triplet cell on beat 2 (played on the 2nd string), followed by a ^5-^b5-^4-^3 quaver cell (played on the 3rd string). This descending line (or a modified variant) is used frequently during verses as an extended single-line riff, in addition to being used in lead breaks\(^{152}\).

The material used in this line can be assessed as being derived from major diatonic and blues pentatonic scale material and this recipe of hybrid scale material is consistently used by Tharpe in construction of her lead lines. As seen in the ‘Rock Me’ solo (figure 4.20), Tharpe accesses this material predominantly in 1st position, in what can be considered her ‘master pitch region’;

![Figure 4.21 Tharpe’s master pitch region (hybrid major diatonic-blues pentatonic scale material).](image)

\(^{152}\) See ‘Rock Me’, verse 1, bar 15 (figure 4.11) for an example of incorporation during a verse.
The physical layout of master pitches in this region allows Tharpe to incorporate open-string hammer-ons, adding drive and rhythmic interest. Further, she relies on the varied colour of cross-strung unison pitches accessible in the region, adding tonal nuance during reiterated pitch passages.

The opening solo of ‘That's All’, recorded at the same session as ‘Rock Me’ in 1938, shows a reliance on the same set of materials and musical gestures\textsuperscript{153},

\textsuperscript{153} The recurrent use of a similar opening solo is analogous to the concept of accompaniment families, as discussed in the analysis of Memphis Minnie. Here, these similar solos could be considered lead break families. In fact, eight of Tharpe’s first ten singles recorded for Decca in 1938 and 1939 use an opening solo “template” similar to that of ‘Rock Me’ and ‘That’s All’. Tharpe slightly modifies the rhythmic profile and melodic contour of the phrases in subsequent songs in the family, but the lines are clearly related.
As can be seen in figure 4.22, Tharpe begins this solo with material mapped over the type 3 tonic chord area, oscillating the \(^5\text{-}^6\), creating a shuffle-like melodic line. She then drops down to her master pitch region, again playing a \(^5\text{-}^6\text{-}^1\) ascending triplet cell, followed by \(^b3\text{-}^2\text{-}^1\) descending cell, and then her master descending line gesture. Here,
Tharpe extends the bar by two beats, allowing her to re-ascend the line, now changing linear direction four times within the scope of six beats. At the end of the solo, Tharpe plays a 4-bar chordal vamp of the major and minor subdominant chords, with a ^b3-^2-^1 bend embedded in the top voice (type 1.2 IV and iv chords), in order to maintain a subtle lead melody whilst playing chords. Tharpe’s approach here, integrating chords into her solo with a moving line above, combines both rhythm and lead functions. In addition to bringing textural contrast to the solo, this can be considered a highly effective approach when self-accompanying. After two sung verses, Tharpe plays a full solo, incorporating similarly derived materials and gestures;
As can be seen in figure 4.23 during the first phrase of the main solo, Tharpe plays a predominantly single line-melody. She begins with material mapped over the type 3 tonic chord area, paying a diatonic riff on the 1st and 2nd strings, incorporating open bass notes for texture. Tharpe then returns to her master pitch region in the second bar, playing a descending $^\flat3^-^\flat2^-^\flat1$, cell followed by an ascending $^\flat5^-^\flat6^-^\flat1$ cell into a master descending line. During the second and third phrases of the solo, Tharpe returns to an active chord approach, using a variety of master chord shapes and bend-fills, in order to constantly maintain a melodic line, whilst adding texture. Additionally, she adds syncopated, broken chord attacks in bars 7 and 11, infusing the harmony with a melodic character, before ending the solo with a type 1 V7-I cadence.

Although Tharpe is using her standard comping chord vocabulary for much of the solo, she creates a distinctly audible solo line throughout the entire solo, through the use of bend-fills and shuffle patterns (melody is annotated in squares in figure 4.23. Again, this demonstrates Tharpe’s ability to combine chord and melody, resulting in a fully self-sufficient approach when playing alone.
In 1941, Tharpe re-recorded ‘That's All’ with the Lucky Millinder Orchestra (Decca 18496, 1941). On this version of the song, Tharpe plays two featured solos, described by Ken Romanowksi (1995) as “hot solos by Rosetta on a guitar that had been electrified”. After a 12-bar introduction by the band, Tharpe plays a 12-bar solo (track time 0:18-0:38), accompanied by the rhythm section. Tharpe constructs her opening solo from 1st position master pitch region material and type 3 tonic chord area material, similar to that seen in the previous solos. After two sung verses, Tharpe is featured in another 12-bar solo, this time accompanied by the full band;

154 Tharpe is also the featured vocalist on this record.
As can be seen in figure 4.24 Tharpe relies less on integration of chords during this solo, possibly due to having the backing of a full big band, which in turn allows her to explore a greater region of the neck, in addition to incorporating double-stop passages. Similar to the approach taken by Memphis Minnie, Tharpe maps much of this solo around upper forms of the I chord, as well as drawing on her master pitch group in first position.

Rosetta begins the solo by mapping over the upper-octave type 1 tonic chord in 12th position, playing a reiterated ^2 on the 1st string (14th fret), bent up a whole tone to a ^3, which she slightly manipulates during the course of seven quaver re-statements. In relation to the underlying I chord harmony, this slight bend of a reiterated pitch creates tonal ambiguity, vacillating between a ^b3 and ^3 over a I chord. On the down beat of the first full bar, Tharpe plays a slow release of the bent ^3, back to the ^2 at the 14th fret. This simple, yet effective musical gesture can be heard as horn-like, matching the lines played by the brass section throughout the track. Also, the re-iteration of the high register pitch calls attention to the entrance of the guitar, allowing the instrument to cut through the soundscape at this point.
After the opening gesture, Tharpe travels through the type 3 tonic chord area to the master pitch region, incorporating a $\text{^b3-^2-^1}$ triplet cell in bar 2, before returning to the type 3 tonic chord area, playing an extended iteration of the associated double-stop. Here, Tharpe plays the double-stops through bar 3, using glissandi for interest, and ends the gesture with a chromatic double-stop descent to the type 2 tonic chord area. Tharpe constructs her second phrase from diatonic and pentatonic material, returning to the double-stops mapped in the type 3 tonic chord area in bar 10. Here, she plays a chromatically descending double-stop, down two semitones, resting at the 5th position. Here, the pitches of the double stop (C and Eb) imply a V7 harmony, which is congruent with the underlying harmony of the bar at that point. Perhaps most notable is the expansive nature of this solo, with Tharpe systematically mapping around the neck from 1st to 14th position within 12 bars.

The incorporation of upper position gestures and double-stops passages, in addition to chord integration and master-pitch region material can be seen again in a brief opening solo from Tharpe’s AFRS Jubilee Broadcast (Armed Forces Radio Service) recording of the gospel standard ‘Down By The Riverside’ (J38, 1943), again featuring the Lucky Millinder Orchestra155.

155 Tharpe is the featured vocalist on this track, demonstrating an exceptional vocal performance (especially evident in her phrasing during the last verse). Her vocal performance on this song highlights her great skill and versatility as singer.
Figure 4.25  Lucky Millinder Orchestra and Sister Rosetta Tharpe, ‘Down By The Riverside’ (AFRS Jubilee Broadcasts, J38, 1943. Track time 1:27 – 1:47). Main solo with annotation of bend and double-stop gestures.

As can be seen in figure 4.25 Tharpe again begins her solo with a 14th fret, ^b3 bend, reiterated twice as a pick-up figure, before releasing the bend through the downbeat of bar 1, to the ^1, played at the 12th fret. While this is the only melodic bend used in this solo, the prominence of the gesture, played in the high-register at the very outset of the solo, makes Tharpe’s guitar presence unmistakeable, especially after being absent from the soundscape in the preceding verses.

After the opening gesture in 12th position, Tharpe plays the rest of the solo around the type 3 tonic chord area and master pitch region. In bars 5-6 she incorporates a V7 chord, using a boogie-fill between a type 1 and type 3 V7 chord, with a type 1.1 V7 chord bend fill in
bar 6. In bars 7-8, Tharpe, plays a 2-bar line rescissory line, changing melodic direction three times. Tharpe then launches into a 2-bar sliding double-stop gesture associated with the type 3 tonic chord shape, before returning to first position for the final phrase of the solo. This last phrase is marked by the use of more linear directional changes, a parallel borrowed iv chord, a cadential type 1 and 3 V7 chord boogie fill, and a fractured type 1 V7 chord, before a final type 1 tonic chord.

In addition to exemplifying Tharpe’s idiotechne, notable again is the sheer amount of musical gesture loaded into 16 bars. At a tempo of around 200bpm, Tharpe’s near constant articulation of a quaver pulse, with all thumb up-stokes, is remarkable. In the same way, this also speaks to left hand control especially when considering the multiple linear-directional shifts, as in bars 7-8.

Additionally, within the context of a big band, featuring three trumpets, three trombones, three saxes, a rhythm section and vocal chorus (Romanowski 1995), Tharpe demonstrates remarkable musical assimilation, using a chromatic vocabulary which perfectly fits the context of a 1940s swing band arrangement. Further, her use of multiple gestures and textures, consistent with her idiotechne, can be considered orchestral in nature, allowing her to seamlessly integrate into the soundscape of a 1940s swing band recording, holding her own, even excelling, as a guest artist featured with “one of the most in-demand big bands of the war years” (Wald 2007, p. 60).

Tharpe’s ability to navigate varied musical settings, whilst continuing to draw on her characteristic approach to playing lead is further elucidated in the song ‘Strange Things Happening Everyday’ (Decca 8669), recorded with the Sam Price Trio in 1944. Tharpe begins the song by playing an abbreviated solo, accompanied by the combo;
As seen in figure 4.26 Tharpe begins her opening solo with a reiterated sliding double-stop gesture, into the type 3 tonic chord area. She then plays a sus-6 double-stop in bar 3, implying a boogie-shuffle pattern, before resolving to a type 3 tonic, then type 2 tonic-related stop. Tharpe then switches textures and registers, returning to the 1st position master pitch region, playing a single-line for the rest of the solo, until the final bars, where she re-enforces the final cadence with a type 1 V7 - I chord gesture, again incorporating texture change for emphasis. Tharpe navigates a iv passing chord in bar 6 with an appropriately modified version of the riff heard in the previous bar over a IV chord (adding a harmonic ^b3 on the second string).

After two verses/chorus sections, Tharpe plays a full 16-bar solo over the previously discussed modified ragtime form (see figure 4.8);
As seen in figure 4.27 again Tharpe draws on her recurrent vocabulary, beginning the solo with material mapped over the type 3 tonic chord. In bar 1, she plays a single-note shuffle, oscillating between $^5$-$^6$ degree of the underlying type 3 tonic chord shape, matching the shuffle pattern played by Price on the piano. In the second half of the phrase (bar 3 and
4), Rosetta plays a re-iterated double-stop associated with the type 2 tonic chord, using texture for contrast, and adding glissandi for effect. During phrase two, (bars 5-8), Tharpe returns to playing first position single-line major and minor-blues material. Again here we see $^5$-$^6$-$^1$ and $^b3$-$^2$-$^1$ cells, with Tharpe changing the direction of the line on almost every main beat in bars 5 and 6, augmenting the temporal space between directional changes in bar 7 and 8, all enhanced by a vacillation of swung quavers and triplets. After the barrage of activity in phrase two, which has increased the sense of musical tension, Tharpe then releases the tension in phrase three, playing a relatively static line mapped over the type 1 and 3 tonic chord areas, using diatonic pitches only. For the final phrase, Tharpe shifts texture, incorporating type 1.1 and 1.2 V7 bend-fills in bar 14, with a modified type 1 I - V7 - I cadential fill to end. Again, notable is the sheer the amount of music ground covered in 16 bars, as well as the reliance on recurrent gestures. Further, in this example, we see Tharpe functioning as a highly effective member of an early R&B/jump-blues combo. Although the text is subtly religious in nature, all other aspects of this track make it stylistically representative of the 1940s R&B/jump blues sound. Notably, Tharpe is able to easily inhabit various musical worlds (swing jazz, and R&B/jump-blues), while drawing on the same gestures heard on her early solo recordings made in the late 1930s, attesting to the versatility and effective nature of her idiotechne and musicianship.

**Tharpe and Live Performance**

What has been shown thus far through the analysis of select songs from the years 1938-1944, is Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s systematic approach to playing lead, and an idiotechne characterised by the use of recurrent cells, riffs and gestures, chord mapping and master pitch regions, incorporation of double stops and chords for textural contrast, and melodic

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156 Burnim and Maultsby define ‘jump blues’ as a style rooted in the blues tradition, characterised by a “twelve-bar boogie-woogie bass foundation overlaid with shuffle rhythms” (2015, p. 242), and usually played by a small combo.

157 See appendix D, figure D.2 transcription, for an additional example of Tharpe’s use of similar musical gestures, during the opening solo of the song ‘This Train’ (Decca 2558, 1939).
directional changes to increase tension. The other available recorded materials from her catalogue during this period all bear similar hallmarks. When turning to an assessment of her later recordings and live performances, Tharpe continues to demonstrate the same approach to comping and playing lead.

An excellent example of this continuity can be found in Tharpe’s televised performance of ‘Didn’t It Rain’, recorded while on the *Blues and Gospel Train* tour, in 1964. Tharpe originally recorded the song with the Sam Price Trio and Marie Knight in 1947 (Decca 48054), and that version features her playing a brief 4-bar opening solo, and a full mid-song break. The profile of those solos is directly in-line with those examined earlier in this section. On the 1964 live version, Tharpe is featured playing two solos. After an extended vamp played by the band at the beginning of the video (allowing time for Tharpe to make a theatrical stage entrance on a horse drawn carriage), Tharpe shoulders her electric guitar, and after a brief level check, plays a 10-bar introduction\(^{158}\);
As seen in figure 4.28 Tharpe begins this solo by sliding into 7th position, playing double-stops with hammer-on and staccato articulations for added effect, a now recognisable opening gesture. Tharpe continues the solo, moving to the 1st position master pitch region, playing an abbreviated descending line gesture, switching directions on the last cell and continuing into a 4-note ascending chromatic cell, which she cycles in bar 5-6, creating tension. Tharpe continues the solo, integrating type 1 and 3 V7 chords in bar 7 and a type 1.1 V7 bend fill in bar 8; in all, demonstrating a continued reliance on musical gestures common to her approach identified in her earlier catalogue.
After two sung verses, in which Tharpe accompanies herself with her characteristic comping vocabulary, she plays a full guitar break, drawing on recurrent lead gestures;
Figure 4.29  Sister Rosetta Tharpe, ‘Didn’t It Rain’ (*Blues and Gospel Train - Live, 1964*). Main solo with annotation of recurrent musical gestures.
As seen in figure 4.29, Tharpe draws from first position master pitch region, type 2 and type 3 tonic chord material for this solo. However, what is noticeable is a reliance on what could be considered more physically-driven gestures, such as double-stops with slides, and extended bends. Tharpe maps her double-stops around type 2 and 3 tonic chord areas, adding glissandi embellishments in conjunction with jumps in register (bars 4-5 and 14-15). Additionally, she juxtaposes her upper position stops against open and first position material. In bar 8, Tharpe plays an extended $^2 - ^b3$ bend on the first string in first position, striking the note on the down-beat of the bar, then bending and releasing on the quaver rhythm throughout the bar, into the second beat of bar 9. This gesture occurs over a I chord harmony, teasing the diatonic ($^2$) and pentatonic ($^b3$) features from the note/harmony combination. Following this gesture in bar 9, Tharpe plays a I - V7 - I (type 1 and 3) chord complex, weighting them with a heavy right hand attack and a staccato articulation of the type 1 tonic chord shape in bar 10.

Noticeable is the temporal space afforded the long bend in this solo. It has been shown that many of Tharpe’s earlier solos were often characterised by loading a large amount of material within a short phrase or section, resulting in drive and energy. Here however, Tharpe takes much time with a single bend, allowing the sonic gesture to permeate the soundscape for six beats. When considering this from a visual perspective, the musical gesture is likely in part chosen for its performative impact.\(^{159}\) Here, the video shows Tharpe’s physical gesture reinforcing the bend, overtly moving her left shoulder in time with the oscillation of the pitch, which she allows to naturally fade, before starting the next phrase. While some shoulder movement is expected when playing a bend, Tharpe over-emphasises the gesture for the sake of the live performance. Additionally, when bending with her left hand, she moves her right

\(^{159}\) This is likely due to the natural evolution of her approach, but could also be in part driven by her incorporation of the electric guitar in the early 1940s. The amplification of the electric guitar creates a longer sustain than that of the steel resonator guitar, which she played during the 1930s, allowing her to harness and manipulate such musical gestures.
hand from the strings immediately after articulating the first note of the bend, waving her right hand for added visual/dramatic effect.

While here we could embark upon a discussion of embodied cognition, within the context of the current analytical framework, these gestures will be read as part of Tharpe’s performative persona\textsuperscript{160}. When assessing the rest of the solo through this lens, there are a number of identifiable events where physical gesture reinforces musical gesture, and \textit{vice versa}. Tharpe begins her solo with three double-stops, an opening figure seen in previous solos, but here we can see Tharpe fretting in 1st position, then sliding seven frets into the first double-stop, a physically demonstrative gesture to begin. During bars 1-2, Tharpe plays a 3-note chromatically ascending cell over the type 3 tonic chord shape. She cycles the gesture three times, each broken up by an open 1\textsuperscript{st} string note. Here, Tharpe raises and drops her shoulders, following the contour of the line accordingly. As she returns to her 1st position master pitch region at the end of bar 2, Tharpe follows the direction of the line into the 1\textsuperscript{st} position note group, with a lean of her body.

She ends the solo with a simply nuanced, yet visually effective gesture in bar 16 and 17, playing a 2-bar re-iteration of the tonic note, cross-stringing the pitches alternately, between the 2\textsuperscript{nd} string (5\textsuperscript{th} fret) and open 1\textsuperscript{st} string. While this reiteration of a unison pitch on adjacent strings allows Tharpe to juxtapose and manipulate the tonal nuances that come from the cross-strung, open-fretted musical gesture, it also allows her to articulate and embellish the note on the second string with a slide. Here she slides from the 1st or 2nd fret to the 5\textsuperscript{th} fret on each re-statement, thus incorporating a repeated musical-visual gesture seven times within the space of two bars\textsuperscript{161}.

\textsuperscript{160} Wilson and Lucia (2017) define embodied cognition in the following way; “Cognition is embodied when it is deeply dependent upon features of the physical body of an agent, that is, when aspects of the agent’s body beyond the brain play a significant causal or physically constitutive role in cognitive processing”.

\textsuperscript{161} Tharpe uses this same gesture as a sign-off riff during her \textit{TV Gospel Time} performance of ‘Up Above My Head’, and also during the opening solo of her voice and guitar performance of the same song. While the gesture can also be heard on some early recordings, Tharpe likely uses the gesture in her live versions due to its effective
4.5 Tharpe and Physical Gesture

Tharpe’s performances of the songs ‘Up Above My Head’ and ‘Down by the Riverside’ on the *TV Gospel Time* programme, recorded in 1962 and 1963, afford another close analysis of Tharpe’s musical approach, as well as further assessment of the connection between her musical and performative gestures. These performances demonstrate a reliance upon many of her idiotechniques, as identified in this chapter, and are recognised as outstanding examples of Tharpe’s musical and performative abilities (Wald 2007; Fast 2008).

As previously seen in the annotated transcription in figure 4.19 during the verses of the performance of ‘Up Above My Head’, on the *TV Gospel Time* programme, Tharpe uses her master chord voicings, with added shuffle and bend-fills for embellishment. Similarly, her main solo draws upon her pre-established lead conventions, including chord mapping, use of a first position master pitch region, and the creative incorporation of chords, sliding double-stop gestures and bends.

The song’s main solo is 32-bars in length, played over two, 16-bar verses, accompanied by an off-stage pianist. For the first two bars of the solo, Tharpe sings a short vocal utterance of “Oh yes, oh yes” at which point, she plays nothing on the guitar, merely reaches down to turn up the volume on her instrument, readying for her ensuing lead break\(^{162}\).

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\(^{162}\) The following video shows Tharpe’s televised performance of ‘Up Above My Head’ on the *TV Gospel Time* programme; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JeaBNAXfHHQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JeaBNAXfHHQ) (Accessed 17 March 2018).
As can be seen in the annotations in figure 4.30, Tharpe’s material in this solo can all be traced to recurrent musical gestures. She begins her lead line in bar 3, using an explosive $^5$-
^6-^1 triplet hammer-on cell, driving into the solo at 202bpm. In the first phrase, she draws on her 1st position master pitch region material, playing a cell in bars 2-3 that outlines the tonic triad, sliding into the highest note of the cell for embellishment. At the start of the second phrase (bar 5), she moves into a cycled chromatic ascending cell on the 3rd string, spilling into the beginning of bar 6, then cycling a diatonic ^5-^6 cell three times over a V7 chord harmony, before returning to the tonic chord in bar 7, reinforced by a ^5-^6-^1 hammer-on cell. This close analysis exemplifies the cell-based nature of Tharpe’s lead playing, again resulting in a sense of energy and drive, as well as tension derived from the chromaticism and angularity of the phrases.

In bar 8, Tharpe leaves the 1st position region and launches into a 5-bar double-stop passage. Congruent with her own convention, she maps these double-stops over the upper type 3 and 2 tonic chords in bar 8-10, and an upper-octave type 1 IV chord in bar 11-12, concluding the passage with an upper-octave type 1 tonic chord related double-stop on the down-beat of bar 13. Here, Tharpe again employs a sequential pattern of ascending and descending position changes, broken with open notes in bars 10 and 12, in order to create a sense of tension and release.

Tharpe adds glissandi in this passage to correspond with position changes, always sliding into a new position. For the ascending glissandi, Tharpe commences the slide in 1st or 2nd position, sliding anywhere from a perfect 5th to an octave up the fretboard, captivating from a visual perspective. Additionally, she articulates the repeated position stops with staccatos, colouring the temporary plateaus with rhythmic accents.

The overall rhythmic profile of this passage further intensifies the solo at this point. Pre-empting the start of the third phrase (bar 9), commencing a sequence of double-stops on the last bar of the second phrase (bar 8), Rosetta then plays each of the double-stops for the first three bars of the phrase on the off-beats, in contrast to the consistent quaver pulse established in the first phrases of the solo. Tharpe moves to a I7 associated double-stop on
the second half of beat 4 in bar 9, anticipating the natural metric change of the downbeat, and in bar 11, she re-aligns a double-stop articulation with the down-beat for the first time in three bars. Here, she plays an upper-form I7 related stop, as a quaver, over an implied IV chord harmony before immediately switching to type 1 IV chord stop on the off-beat, resuming her syncopated attacks. Tharpe again anticipates the harmonic and registral change of bar 12, switching to a type 2 IV chord stop on the last beat of bar 11. She finally lands on the downbeat of bar 13 with an upper register type 1 tonic chord double-stop, constructed of a perfect 4th interval. After a long sequence of double-stops built on the interval of a 3rd, the choice of perfect 4th stop effectively reinforces a sense of cadential resolution at this point of the phrase.

After arriving on an upper-octave type 1 tonic double-stop in bar 13, Tharpe plays a quick fade-away slide, taking her back down to the familiar 1st position master pitch region. This dramatic musical gesture (a 12-fret slide) is accompanied by a similar physical gesture. During the first 11 bars of the solo Tharpe is directly facing the camera, but at this highpoint in the solo, she allows the momentum of her left hand, driving the length of the neck, to turn her body 90 degree’s, so that she is now positioned sideways on to the camera. At the change of harmony in bar 13, where Tharpe reverses the direction of the line and plays a fade-away slide back to 1st position, she abruptly pulls herself back to face the camera, again using the physical momentum generated by the descending slide to pull her body back to it’s original position on stage. This physical gesture, a return to centre, supports the musical return at this point to relatively stable 1st position material at the end of the passage. In bar 15, Tharpe plays a type 1.2 tonic chord shuffle fill, functioning as a cadential gesture to conclude the first half of the solo. Additionally, this brief moment of musical arrival functions to support Tharpe’s spoken exclamation of “Lets do that again!” before she launches into a second verse of the solo.
Tharpe begins the second half of the solo with an anticipatory musical gesture, commencing the opening phrase before the harmonic material for verse/solo one has actually finished. Over the I chord harmony in bar 16, she frets a ^2 on the 1st string, at the 14th fret, associated with the upper-octave type 1 tonic chord shape, immediately bending the note up a semitone, to a ^b3. She holds the note for two full beats, before releasing it to a ^1 on the last quaver of the bar, then immediately slides away from the note, down to 1st position. This tonic fade-away slide is played into the downbeat of the first full bar of the second verse (bar 17), leaving the listener with only the ghost of the bend gesture in their ear at this significant point of arrival. Although she does not articulate any notes on this important downbeat, Tharpe fills the space with a physical gesture, sliding down the entire neck, and then back up to 12th position within the space of a beat and a half. She repeats this musical and physical gesture twice, in bars 17 and 18, and fills the temporal space between the second and third repetition of the gesture with a 2-note fill in 1st position at the beginning of bar 18, showing an impressive instrumental command. After three repetitions of the same gesture, Tharpe detours on the way back up to 12th position, abruptly sliding into a type 3 tonic chord double-stop, again played on the off-beat. She briefly incorporates pitch material associated with the type 3 chord at the end of the phrase (bar 20), before returning to her first position master note region. At this point, Tharpe returns to playing swung quavers, in stark contrast to the highly syncopated rhythm and disjunct melodic movement of the previous four bars.

Tharpe attacks a V7 chord shape in first position at the start of the next phrase (bar 21), playing on the downbeat and holding it for a crotchet, articulating the chord with a heavy thumb-pick down-stroke. On the second beat of the bar, Tharpe plays a type 3 V7 chord with an aggressive thumb up-stroke attack. She immediately proceeds to bend the top note of the chord up a semitone, and fills the next four beats with a crochet bend-fill. Tharpe accompanies the left hand bend with a right hand circular movement, again physically
emphasising the musical gesture. After the bend gesture, Tharpe remains in first position note group for bar 22, playing a diatonic melodic line that can be considered relatively stable after the tension and intensity of the previous sections. In bar 23, Tharpe plays a complete octave ascent of her first position master pitch region, keeping the line uniform in direction for an entire bar. However, in the pick up to the 3rd phrase of this section (bar 24), Tharpe again quickly switches gears, returning to another 5-bar passage of sliding double-stops, analogous in profile to the passage played during the first verse of the solo. Again, her double-stops fall on the off-beats, with the change of position pre-empting or pushing the downbeat of each bar, embellishing the stops with glissandi and staccato articulations. This second iteration of the double-stop phrase feels slightly straighter, due to the passage starting closer to the true downbeat of phrase 3 (bar 25) rather than anticipating the phrase by a full bar, as she did in the double-stop passage in the first half of the solo (bar 8). In bar 30, Tharpe recalls the $^5$-$^6$-$^1$ hammer-on gesture used throughout this solo, and throughout her catalogue, which can be heard as a unifying device, or an effort to come full circle in the solo. To finish, Tharpe employs another visually and musically effective gesture, similar to that seen at the end of the ‘Didn’t It Rain’ solo (figure 4.29, bar 16-17), sliding into a cross-string re-iteration of the tonic note on the first and second strings.

The close analysis of this solo again demonstrates Tharpe’s reliance on a characteristic technical and musical vocabulary, and importantly, the connection between her musical and physical gestures. What is also apparent when assessing this performance from a macro-perspective, is the pure ease and confidence with which Tharpe occupies the stage. Her artistry and appeal is on clear display, and she boldly presents as a musician whose virtuosity on the guitar is matched by her consummate performance skills.

Tharpe’s performance of the song ‘Down By The Riverside’ on the TV Gospel Time programme is another exceptional resource, aiding in the further close assessment of Tharpe’s

Susan Fast defines this as a “pro-type” of Pete Townsend’s characteristic windmill gesture (2008, p. 165).
technical, musical and performative approach. At the beginning of the video, the camera pans to a tight shot of Tharpe’s right hand, which facilitates the analysis of her physical approach. Her consistent thumb pick up-strokes can be clearly identified, as can her $i$ and $m$ accompanimental chord strums\textsuperscript{164}. The song’s verse and chorus sections are both 16-bars in length, and Tharpe accompanies herself using her standard vocabulary, in addition to being supported by an off-stage pianist and an all-male gospel choir who provide sung responses to her vocal statements during the verses. She begins the song with an unaccompanied 8-bar guitar solo, and later plays a 32-bar solo over a full verse and chorus progression.

The introduction solo in this performance is somewhat of a departure for Tharpe, in that she uses a musical quotation of the song’s main melody rather than a lead line based on her characteristic vocabulary. This song, a traditional spiritual dating back to the American Civil War, would not only have been a well-known standard for a general audience, but fans of Tharpe would likely have recognized it from her hit recording of the song with the Lucky Millinder Orchestra in 1943\textsuperscript{165}.

During the first six bars of the opening solo, Tharpe directly quotes the melody from the second phrase of the song’s verse. She modifies slightly, extending the second bar to six beats, with the addition of a low bass note that embellishes the line and also provides harmonic support for the next phrase;

\textsuperscript{164}The following video shows Tharpe’s televised performance of ‘Down By The Riverside’ on the TV Gospel Time programme; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xzr_GBwa&g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xzr_GBwa&g) (Accessed 17 March 2018).

\textsuperscript{165}For details on the song’s origins, see Joyce et al (2012), p. 197-198.
As seen in figure 4.31, Tharpe plays this opening solo in 1st position, adding glissandi to pivotal notes of the main melody. She slides into the downbeat of bars 1 and 3, in addition to the highest note of the phrase, in bar 5. Tharpe also articulates the minim in bar 6 with staccatos, highlighting what will become an important moment in the sung verses. These notes accompany the words “war no” in the subsequent sung verses, in the context of the refrain; ‘Ain’t gonna study war no more’. After this brief, but effective use of idiomatic articulation, Tharpe concludes the opening solo with a 2-bar vamp on type 1 tonic and sub-dominant chords, integrating her master-chord voicings in order to signal the end of the solo. Tharpe’s approach during this brief solo demonstrates her ability to modify her standard lead approach when necessary, in order to serve the needs of the song/performance context, whilst still incorporating some of her idiotechniques.
After the introduction solo, Tharpe sings two verse/chorus sections, accompanied by the pianist and choir. During these sections she comps whilst singing, playing her master I, IV and V7 chords, with shuffle and bend fills. Tharpe’s high level of showmanship is again on display during these sections, frequently gesturing with her head and right hand in order to add weight to certain passages. Toward the end of the first chorus, she claps on the backbeat for a bar, consummately entertaining her audience who are seated only a few feet in front of her, able to sing and comp seamlessly while incorporating physical performance gestures.

At the end of the second verse, Tharpe plays a type 1 V7-I cadential fill in the last bar, which she plays with her thumb-pick, alternating down and upstrokes, in order to ramp up the intensity and drive toward the solo. She then immediately launches into a 32-bar solo, accompanied only by the piano. The choir, as if unable to remain silent or still during Tharpe’s lead break, spontaneously break into hand-claps on the backbeat;
Figure 4.32  Sister Rosetta Tharpe ‘Down by the Riverside’ (TV Gospel Time programme, c. 1962-3). Main solo with annotation of recurrent musical gestures.
Tharpe begins this solo with a syncopated pick-up gesture, sliding into a type 3 tonic chord double-stop, which she reiterates three times, a now common opening gesture, commanding attention with both a musically and physically compelling gesture at the outset of the solo. During bars 1 and 2, Tharpe uses type 3 tonic chord area and 1st position master pitch region material, playing a 3-note chromatic cell sequence, which alternates melodic direction during each statement. Here, the 3-note cell, played over a swung-4 feel, creates a moment of metric dissonance, enhancing the chromatic ambiguity of the bars. Tharpe sequences the cell five times over a I chord, creating an anticipation for a 6th cell (the matching descent to the previous ascent) which she abruptly halts. This rupture leads into a 2-bar stable quotation of the song’s main melody. The undulating chromaticism of the first two bars is the perfect musical counter to the instantly recognisable melody in bars 3-4. Here, Tharpe again shows a capacity to combine her standard approach to soloing with an atypical approach (musical quotation), in a highly effective manner.

In bars 5-12, Tharpe returns to her common vocabulary, including a 3-note chromatic ascending cell cycled in bar 5, a held ^2 - ^b3 bend over the upper-octave type 1 tonic chord, with a fade-away slide in bar 9, and type 1 V7 chord fills in bar 13. While these are all musical gestures associated with her now familiar idiotechne, notable again is the performative component of this section. Within the space of four bars (bars 8-11), Tharpe has changed position on the neck four times, embellishing her position changes with both physical and musical gestures (bends and slides), contributing to the perceived energy of the solo performance. At the beginning of the third phrase, the camera is in a wide shot, and the viewer can clearly see Tharpe’s physical engagement with the 12th position long-bend and fade-away slide, which she seem to be play not just with her fingers, but with her entire body.

166 During the first eight bars of the solo, the camera angle starts with a wide shot, then pans to her right hand, and then to her left, giving an excellent view of how Tharpe’s hands work during these recurrent gestures.
During the start of the fourth phrase (bar 13), Tharpe attacks a type 1 V7 chord on the down-beat, and then restrikes a type 3 V7 chord on the second beat of the bar, with a heavy right hand up-strum, before launching into another extended type 1.2 V7 chord crotchet bend, analogous to the gesture used in the main solo of the TV Gospel Time performance of ‘Up Above My Head’. However, in this solo, Tharpe extends the gesture over two bars, again, lifting her right hand away from the strings in order to gesture in time with the oscillation of the bend, until it fades at the end of bar 14. In the following two bars of the phrase (15 and 16), Tharpe contrasts the lugubrious, almost hypnotic type 1.2 V7 chord bend gesture, with a staccato off-beat articulation of an extended type 1 tonic chord, one very rarely used by Tharpe. Her chosen voicing implies a Db9 harmony, and is relatively dissonant in contrast to her typical chord extensions. Here, she matches the sense of harmonic dissonance with rhythmic dissonance, playing the chord with an aggressive thumb upstroke on the off-beats, for two full bars.

Tharpe begins the following phrase by playing an upper-octave type 1 sub-dominant chord double-stop in 12th position, which she slides into on the downbeat of bar 17, holding the harmonically stable diad for two full bars, effectively contrasting the rhythmic instability and harmonic dissonance of the preceding two bars. She then plays an upper-octave type 1 tonic chord related double-stop in bar 19, immediately embellished by a fade-away slide, leaving the rest of the bar empty. To conclude the phrase, Tharpe returns to the 1st position note group, laying into a ^b3 bend on the first string, in bar 20. The following phrase begins with a sporadic, staccato 3-note chromatic cell, before launching into a relatively stable but expansive double-stop slide gesture in bars 23-24, connecting the type 2 and 3 tonic chord areas. While this phrase (bars 21-24) again employs a number of articulative gestures (bends, slides, staccatos), in comparison to the previous phrases, it contains a relatively minimal amount of pitch material. By leaving temporal space between pitch cells in this phrase, Tharpe creates a sense building intensity, and anticipation for what will come next. Her physical
gestures here are also connected, as at this point of the solo her body rotates on stage, at first facing the audience then turning to 90 degrees, her physical position again being driven by the motion of her hands. Her head movements are synchronised with her right hand attacks, demonstrating an inherent connection between, and command of, both the musical and the performative.

During the penultimate phrase of the solo, Tharpe again plays a double-stop passage mapped around the upper-octave type 1 tonic chord form in $12^{th}$ position. While she played a similar phrase in the ‘Up Above My Head (TV Gospel Time)’ main solo, her approach here is varied. In contrast to the syncopation of the double-stop passage in ‘Up Above My Head’, Tharpe plays this phrase with a stable rhythmic profile, playing on the strong beats of the bar, while embellishing the double- stops with half-step chromatic adjustments. Notably, for this entire phrase Tharpe turns her back on her audience, in essence playing directly to her all-male backing choir, whilst manipulating and commanding these upper-position chords, embellishing them with physical and musical gestures. Tharpe continues with the rotation of her body, until she has turned almost a full 360 degrees, effectively showcasing her musical, technical and performative abilities to all who are watching; her studio audience, the viewers at home and her backing group. Tharpe ends the solo, with a fitting closing gesture, playing a full octave chromatic ascent of her first position note group.

This close analysis of both of Tharpe’s TV Gospel Time performances demonstrate many of the recurrent elements of Tharpe’s approach to playing lead, as well as her ability to vary her approach when necessary. These videos also clearly demonstrate Tharpe’s ability to structure her solos for maximum gestural effect, and show an inherent connection between her command of the musical and performative.
4.6 Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Influence and Legacy

Tharpe’s musical and performative style, as assessed in the previous sections, have been widely recognised as influential, and are often described as forerunners to the norms characteristic of rock n’ roll. Gayle Wald describes Tharpe as a “rock n’ roll trailblazer” (Wald, 2007) and a documentary of Tharpe’s career aptly describes her as the “Godmother of Rock n’ Roll” (Csaky 2011). While Tharpe’s somatic gestures, such as single-string lines, double-stops and bends can certainly be identified in the style of many rock n’ roll lead players, it would seem that the ‘energy’ of Tharpe’s approach is the most frequently noted aspect of her playing. Within this chapter, it has been shown that this energy is a derivative of Tharpe’s active approach to comping, as well as the fundamental tendencies of her lead idiotechne, which include fast tempos, driving rhythmic patterns, constantly shifting textures, frequent chromaticism and angular melodicism. Millard specifically identifies the energy in Tharpe’s ‘explosive picking and propulsive strumming’, stating that Tharpe’s ‘singing and picking influenced a whole generation of founding rock n’ roll musicians including Carl Perkins [and] Jerry Lee Lewis” (2004, p. 24). Similarly, the United States Library of Congress’ inducted Tharpe’s ‘Down by the Riverside’ (1944) into the National Recording Registry in 2004, due to Tharpe’s “spirited guitar playing” and “influence on early rhythm-and-blues performers” (Cannady 2005)\(^\text{167}\)

While statements from artists such as Johnny Cash and Little Richard (Wald 2007; Cosby 2016) elucidate Tharpe’s impact upon later generations of musicians, it is clear that her physical performance style, which in this chapter has been inherently linked to her playing, was also a key component of her affect. First hand accounts of Tharpe’s performances elucidate the impact of her skill and showmanship, as from Alfred Miller, a church musical director, who described the impact of Tharpe’s technical and performance style, stating;

\(^{167}\) The U.S. Library of Congress’ national recording registry catalogues songs which it deems “culturally, historically or aesthetically significant”. A complete list can be found here https://www.loc.gov/programs/national-recording-preservation-board/recording-registry/complete-national-recording-registry-listing/ (Accessed 8 January 2018).
She could do runs, she could do sequences, she could do arpeggios, and she could play anything with the guitar. You could say something and she could make the guitar say it . . . I mean, she could put the guitar behind her and play it; she could sit on the floor and play it, she could lay down and play it (Wald 2007, pp. 71-72).

Comparisons between the playing and performance style of Tharpe and Chuck Berry, a player often considered the progenitor of rock n’ roll lead guitar and showmanship, are often drawn. Ira Tucker, singer for the Dixie Hummingbirds gospel group directly draws the link between Tharpe and Berry stating “Yeah, Chuck Berry got a lot of that stuff from her.” (ibid, p. 191). Geraldine Hambrick, a Chicago gospel singer and a contemporary of Tharpe further supports Tucker’s position, stating that “when Chuck Berry came out, I had seen all that” (ibid., p. 71), implying a connection between his and her style.

In an article exploring the issue of gender marginalization in the popular music canon, musicologist Susan Fast engages with the impact and implications of Tharpe’s performance style, acknowledging her unique position as a pioneering female lead player and noting her ability to “craft virtuosic guitar solos that rival those of her contemporaries and rock guitar players since” (2008, p. 160). Fast goes on to state that Tharpe’s style, from both a musical and performative perspective was “quintessentially rock n’ roll” (ibid.,).

Through each of the above accounts and analyses, is clear that Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s idiotechne and performative engagement with the instrument had significant impact, explicitly and implicitly influencing subsequent generations of guitar players and performers. Thus, Tharpe clearly belongs within a robust history of the guitar in American popular music.

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168 Steve Waksman states that Berry set the tone for the electric guitarist to” became something of a culture hero” and “turned the electric guitar into a spotlight instrument” (Waksman 2001, p. 116).
4.7 Summary

As shown in this chapter, Sister Rosetta Tharpe demonstrates a highly consistent and singular approach to playing rhythm and lead across her catalogue. Her approach to playing rhythm can be defined by a reliance on a variety of recurrent master-chord shapes, embellished through the use of gestures such as shuffle patterns and chord tone bend-fills, creating a constant sense of movement within her accompaniments, even within passages of static harmony. Whilst the harmonic profile of Tharpe’s songs adheres to the expected gospel and gospel-blues vocabulary of the time, she incorporates borrowed $iv$ chords, likely derived from swing jazz vocabulary. Tharpe often incorporates single-line fills during her accompaniments, playing them in response to her vocal lines, engaging with the call-and-response characteristic typical of the gospel and blues genres. Additionally, Tharpe’s bend-fills, which often imply a pentatonic vocabulary, function as counter-melodic lines during her accompaniments. The use of these combined devices defines Tharpe as having an active comping approach.

Tharpe’s approach to playing lead is also highly systematic, including reliance on a master-pitch region and navigation of the upper neck via chord mapping. The use of recurrent riffs and cells is characteristic, as is an often-angular melodic profile, with an emphasis on rescissory motion. Tharpe consistently draws on a hybrid scale vocabulary of major diatonic and blues pentatonic material, resulting in frequent use of chromaticism, which at times aurally locates her within the standard jazz tradition, as does the speed and angularity of her lines. Tharpe incorporates double-stops, embellished with glissandi, often used to navigate the neck. Additionally, the frequent incorporation of chords into her solos, in conjunction with the use of double-stops, results in constantly changing textures throughout her breaks, especially effective when playing alone.

Demonstrating a unique right hand approach, Tharpe predominantly plays chords with her $i$ and $m$ fingers, whilst playing lead lines, all up-strokes with a thumb pick. While this
approach is unusual, it is highly effective. A high level of technical proficiency is identifiable when assessing both her left and right hand, as shown by her frequent switches between chords and single lines, and position shifts on the neck. Tharpe’s ability to play intricate lead lines at high tempos, using all up-strokes with her right hand thumb, is technically impressive.

As noted, Tharpe’s musical vocabulary situates her at a crossroads between gospel, blues and jazz genres. This versatility is matched in her recorded output, effortlessly integrating into, and navigating, various musical settings throughout her career, including vocal duo, big bands, early R&B combos, and gospel combo and quartets. Within each of these settings, Tharpe’s idiotechne, or stylistic fingerprints, are consistently identifiable, from her first recordings in 1938, through to her last at the end of the 1960s.

Finally, in addition to demonstrating a high level of musicianship and technical ability, it is clear that Tharpe developed a performative persona constructed around, and informed by, her guitar playing. While the musical and technical analysis in this chapter has identified Tharpe’s recurrent melodic and harmonic vocabulary, it has also shown that certain musical gestures used frequently by Tharpe, may likely have been driven by physical gesture, chosen to enhance the performative aspect of her playing and resulting in a captivating level of showmanship in her performances.
Chapter 5

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Conclusion

The primary aim of this study has been to contribute to the field of popular guitar research by studying the idiotechne, or individual playing style, of three pioneering guitarists. While there have been a handful of similar academic studies that focus on the instrumental craft of popular guitar players, this thesis has diversified the field in respect to genre and gender representation, through the examination of pioneering country and gospel-blues practitioners, as well as three female subjects.

![Figure 5.1] Existing academic idiotechne studies, updated to include the subjects of this thesis.

In the initial stages of this project, a framework for analysis was conceived in order to ensure a robust examination of each subject. This framework (shown in figure 1.2) initially drew upon Allan Moore’s concept of individual style, or idiolect, yet furthers his concept in order to specifically acknowledge a musician’s instrumental craft in relation to their idiom. This study also offers new terminology relevant to the field, in particular that of idiotechne and idiotechniques, terminology that allows for the acknowledgement and close analysis of the role of an instrument, and a practitioner’s embodied cognition, within the creative process. It is hoped that these analytical tools, concepts and terminology will be of benefit to the popular
guitar research community, unifying future projects with a consistent yet flexible approach to analysis, and accompanying relevant language.

While the main subjects of this thesis, Maybelle Carter, Memphis Minnie and Sister Rosetta Tharpe, had been recognised in previous academic literature and within popular media as key figures in the development of the guitar within early-recorded American popular music, scant research had been undertaken into uncovering the specifics of their idiotechne, until now. In addition to drawing on a wide range of pre-existing scholarship in order to trace the musical development of each player, as well as contextualizing them within their respective genres and amongst their contemporaries, it has been determined through close technical and musical analyses, that each player has a discernible idiotechne. The table in figure 5.2 collates the main findings of each study;
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<td>• Primarily diatonic melodic and harmonic vocabulary, in line with anticipated stylistic norms of early country.</td>
<td>• Primarily diatonic and pentatonic melodic vocabulary, and diatonic harmonic vocabulary, in line with anticipated stylistic norms of country and urban blues guitar playing.</td>
<td>• Harmonic profile adherent to the anticipated stylistic norms of gospel and gospel-blues with some harmonic vocabulary derived from jazz.</td>
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<td>• Lead breaks constructed on a principle of melodic imitation, with consistent use of strategic melodic deviations.</td>
<td>• Frequent, creative engagement with the musical device of call and response.</td>
<td>• Hybrid melodic vocabulary of major, diatonic and blues pentatonic material, resulting in frequent chromaticism.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• The use of recurrent riffs, cells and angular melodic profiles.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Primary engagement with standard tuning, except when playing slide.</td>
<td>• Engagement with open-tunings in early catalogue, then a turn toward exclusive use of standard tuning in mid and late catalogue.</td>
<td>• Exclusive use of Vestapol tuning (in a variety of sounding keys) across her catalogue.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use of a thumb pick and finger picks in right hand.</td>
<td>• Use of thumb and fingerpicks in right hand.</td>
<td>• Use of thumb pick in right hand.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Thumb used to play lead lines in Carter scratch style, while fingers play chords.</td>
<td>• Use of recurrent intra- and inter-key seed and master riffs across her catalogue.</td>
<td>• Fingers used to strum chords when comping, with thumb used to play lead (usually all up-strokes).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Incorporation of the flatpick technique in her later catalogue.</td>
<td>• Engagement with first position harmonic/melodic material in early period, more extensive use of the full range of the instrument in mid and later periods.</td>
<td>• Active approach to comping via chordal embellishment, through the use of shuffle patterns and chord-tone bend gestures.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Traditional bass-strum style of accompaniment embellished with alternating or walking bass lines.</td>
<td>• Recurrent use of master-chord shapes associated with Vestapol tuning.</td>
<td>• Recurrent use of master-chord shapes associated with Vestapol tuning.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Simultaneous integration of lead and rhythm guitar functions, via innovation of the Carter Scratch style.</td>
<td>• Texturally diverse lead-breaks incorporating single lines, chords and double-stops lines.</td>
<td>• Texturally diverse lead-breaks incorporating single lines, chords and double-stops lines.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Creative engagement with traditional slide and fingerstyle techniques in addition to use of the Carter Scratch.</td>
<td>• Use of a master-pitch region in first position.</td>
<td>• Use of a master-pitch region in first position.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Primarily first position chord/scale use.</td>
<td>• Upper neck navigation, via chord mapping and double stops.</td>
<td>• Upper neck navigation, via chord mapping and double stops.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.2 Overview of key idiotechne findings.
As shown in figure 5.2, while Maybelle Carter, Memphis Minnie and Sister Rosetta Tharpe demonstrated engagement with many of the anticipated stylistic norms of their respective genres, they each developed personalised approaches to playing rhythm and lead. While Carter and Minnie drew on the relatively simple harmonic vocabulary of their respective genres, country and blues, each engaged in extensive navigation of keys via use of the capo and alternate tunings. Rosetta Tharpe drew on harmonic conventions from both within and outside the gospel-blues genre, in particular that of swing jazz, whilst functioning exclusively in Vestapol tuning, navigating various keys through relative re-tuning.

When constructing lead lines, Carter drew on a principal of melodic imitation, while Minnie and Tharpe incorporated autonomous lead breaks based on a personalised lexicon of recurrent master riffs and gestures. Although Memphis Minnie was largely adherent to the anticipated stylistic approaches to playing lead and rhythm within the blues, she deployed a lexicon of intra- and inter-key seeds riffs, unifying her voice across her catalogue. While Minnie can be heard comping on a handful of sides, the vast majority of her recordings feature her playing lead in various duos and combo settings, in addition to incorporating traditional blues fingerstyle techniques when self-accompanying. Both Carter and Tharpe demonstrated highly unique approaches to playing lead, developing innovative right-hand techniques that allowed them to combine rhythm and lead guitar functions simultaneously.

On most recordings, Maybelle Carter functioned primarily in first position, employing a relatively narrow range of the instrument. Nonetheless, she created highly effective and identifiable lead breaks within her limited parameters. While Minnie incorporated an expanding range of the instrument over the course of her recording career, navigating the neck via the processes of chord-mapping, Tharpe harnessed the entire range of the instrument from the outset of her recording career, using recurrent gestures, chord mapping and pitch areas to unify her sound across her catalogue. While each of the three subjects shares
commonalities, as well as contrasts in terms of musical and technical approaches, they each demonstrated a high level of technical skill, creative musicianship and collaborative engagement across the breadth of their respective recording careers.

Whilst detecting and analysing the idiotechniques that comprise the idiotechnes of Maybelle Carter, Memphis Minnie and Sister Rosetta Tharpe, this study has also shown each player to have shaped or reinforced stylistic norms within their respective genres, during key periods of early recorded American popular music. As a guitarist in the Carter Family, the innovation of Carter’s Scratch technique centralized the role of the lead guitar in early country music, with the style adopted by generations of players within and outside the genre. As a recording artist whose career spanned the late 1920s to the 1940s, Memphis Minnie released hit records in both country and urban blues styles. As one of the most commercially successful blues artists of the 1930s and early forties, Minnie creatively engaged with and reinforced the stylistic norms of lead playing within her field. As an integral member of the Chicago blues community, her incorporation of the electric guitar, along with developments from other key players, influenced the rise of the instrument to a position of supremacy within many sub-genres of popular music. Recognized as the first commercially successful gospel musician, Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s musical style reflected an integration of gospel-blues, swing and early R&B elements. Possessing a playing style unlike that of almost any of her contemporaries, Tharpe developed an idiotechne that was equally effective in a solo guitar and voice arrangement as within the context of a boogie-woogie piano trio or swing jazz band. Her active approach to comping and a lead guitar style driven by both musical and performative choices proved to have been of influence upon subsequent generations of players across multiple genres, thus clarifying and reinforcing Tharpe’s acknowledged significance within the popular music canon.

Although the primary aim of the study has been to identify and analyse the idiotechnes of three pioneering players, it is hoped that the supporting research has also illuminated
various connections within the popular guitarscape (Dawe 2010). Supporting investigations in each chapter of the thesis have included the assessment of playing approaches of the contemporaries of Carter, Minnie and Tharpe, the collaborative connections made with other guitarists during each subject’s recording career, and the impact of these women on the development of the guitar in popular music and subsequent generations of players. As documented, Maybelle Carter was commercially active from the late 1920s through to the 1960s, primarily working with The Carter Family and later the Carter Sisters, but also collaborating with players such as Jimmie Rodgers, Chet Atkins and Mike Seeger. Her influence has been traced through the development of country music, bluegrass and folk-rock with players such as Earl Scruggs, Norm Blake, and Doc Watson explicitly acknowledging her influence, and numerous players, including Bob Dylan and Woody Guthrie, incorporating the Carter Scratch style into their own sound. Memphis Minnie’s musical collaborations were extensive, working with significant figures such as Big Bill Broonzy and Tampa Red within the 1930s urban blues scene, in addition to her primary duo partners, Kansas Joe and Little Son Joe. Further, her impact has been traced through the development of the electric blues and R&B genres of the late 1940s and early 50s, and into the rock era of the 1960s. Her playing style and incorporation of the electric guitar had a clear influence on guitarists active in the late 1940s, supported by statements of explicit influence from players including Bukka White and Johnny Shines. Minnie’s impact can also be gauged via the prevalence of cover versions of her songs recorded by various groups and artists from diverse genres and eras, including Tampa Red, Muddy Waters, Led Zeppelin (Jimmy Page) and Jefferson Airplane (Jorma Kaukonen)169. The crossover nature of Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s career is evident when situating her within the popular guitarscape, developing first as a gospel guitarist, but crossing over into collaborative

169 Plasketes asserts that one of the functions of the cover version in popular music is to act “as a monument or tribute to the past, and prime innovators” (2010 p. 127), noting that covers “restate influences […] and make explicit connections between artistic generations” (p. 127-28). In this context, the covers of Minnie’s songs are read similarly, elucidating the ‘explicit connections’ between significant figures in the history of the popular guitar, further solidifying the position of Minnie as a ‘prime innovator’.
engagements with popular swing-jazz groups including the Lucky Millinder Orchestra and Noble Sissle and his Orchestra. Her approaches as both a guitarist and performer, in particular the performative aspects of her playing, had impact on many artists in the rock n’ roll era and beyond, including guitarists Johnny Cash and Carl Perkins, as well as other significant non-guitarists such as Little Richard.

In weaving together these multiple strands of musical collaboration, impact and influence, it is evident that Maybelle Carter, Memphis Minnie and Sister Rosetta Tharpe were integral figures within the popular guitarscape in the twentieth century. It is hoped that the supplemental knowledge provided in this thesis of the shape and inter-connectivity of the guitarscape surrounding the three main subjects will be of benefit to future researchers.

A number of players referenced in this study would be suitable candidates for future idiotechne studies, using the analytical tools developed for this project. Of particular necessity are studies of those who can be considered pioneers within their respective genres. A close analysis of the style of Frank Ferera, a Hawaiian slide guitarist noted in chapter two, who recorded extensively during the teens and 1920s, accompanying Vernon Dalhart on his seminal 1924 recording ‘Wreck of The Old 97’ (Malone 2010), would further inform the guitarscape, specifically in relation to Ferera’s influence on the incorporation of the slide guitar in country and blues. Further, of particular interest are Ferera’s guitar duet recordings with his wife, Helen Louise Ferera, recorded for Victor in 1915-1916170. Tampa Red and Big Bill Broonzy, noted in chapter three as collaborators of Memphis Minnie, were influential proponents of the early urban blues style (Evans 2002), and a close analysis of their respective idiotechnes would further illuminate the career of Memphis Minnie, as well as the integration of the electric guitar in blues during the 1930s and 1940s. A close analysis of the idiotechne of pioneering player Lonnie Johnson would be another study of particular interest. As a guitarist

170 For discographical information on Louise and Frank Ferera see Discography of American Historical Recordings’ (2018) Louise and Ferera (Musical group)
who recorded extensively during the 1920s and 1930s, inhabiting both the blues and jazz idioms, an assessment of his playing style would facilitate both a finer understanding of his significant influence (Cohn 1993), as well as the nature of his cross-over status, thus better informing our understanding of Rosetta Tharpe's career trajectory.

The continued study of the idiotechnes and experiences of female practitioners is also of great importance, in order to ensure that the developing knowledge of the popular guitarscape is both robust and inclusive. Close studies of the playing styles of a number of women noted in this thesis, such as Roba Stanley, Rosa Lee Carson, Geeshie Wiley and Libba Cotton would contribute to the knowledge of the approaches and innovations of female guitarists in popular music.

While it is felt that the outcomes of this study reflect its initial aims, there are areas of continued research surrounding Carter, Minnie and Tharpe that could be supported by the findings of this study. Further close analysis of Maybelle Carter's guitar breaks on Carter Family recordings, in comparison to the guitar breaks heard on recordings made by the group during live radio transcriptions (Kahn 1996) would reveal Maybelle’s engagement, if any, with improvisation. Close analysis of the interaction between Maybelle and Sara Carter when playing as a guitar duo would further elucidate the skill of both players, as well as the nuances of their ensemble approach. The noted evolution of Maybelle’s flatpick approach and her engagement with, or influence upon, the emerging genre of bluegrass would be a viable area for further research. Additional close analysis of the guitar duo interaction between Memphis Minnie and her various collaborators including Kansas Joe, Little Son Joe, Tampa Red and Big


172 In the initial stages of planning this study, the inclusion of a fourth main subject, Mary Osborne was seriously considered. However, due to the word-count limitations of this thesis, as well as Osborne’s career straddling the swing and be-bop eras (rather than mainstream popular music), Osborne was left out of this particular study. Further close analysis of the idiotechne of Osborne, one of the “leading” jazz guitarists of the 1940s and 50s (Boone 2003, p. 74), and collaborator of Coleman Hawkins, Mary Lou Williams and Billie Holliday, would be of great benefit to jazz guitar research, elucidating the skill and position of perhaps the only women to gain commercial success as a lead guitarist in jazz during her era (Ferris 2011).
Bill Broonzy would be of benefit, enhancing the knowledge of Minnie’s musical versatility, and of the varied collaborative approaches taken by guitar duos in early popular music. Closer analysis of Rosetta Tharpe’s engagement with swing jazz, including the derived elements identified in her musical vocabulary, would further enhance the understanding of Tharpe’s musical approach, and also provide greater insight into the development of players whose idiotechne crosses multiple musical boundaries.

In addition to the continued areas of research surrounding Carter, Minnie and Tharpe as proposed above, it is felt that further consideration of the concept of influence and its quantification within the popular guitar canon would be of benefit. While the methods used in this study, such as explicit acknowledgement of influence, aural identification of similar stylistic attributes and the existence of cover versions as a signifier of re-stated influence (Plasketes 2010) have been sufficient in relation to the parameters of this project, a refinement of this methodology would be beneficial.

Finally, in addition to contributing to the field of idiotechne studies and supporting the ongoing construction of a comprehensive history of the popular guitar in the 20th century, this study offers extensive original transcriptions. Created in order to facilitate and enhance the musical analyses within this thesis, it is hoped that these transcriptions will also be of benefit to the performance and pedagogy communities. The aim throughout this study has been to offer pertinent sectional transcriptions where necessary, in order to elucidate analysis (see appendix A for a list of the transcriptions created for this project). While outside the scope of this project, the completion of full transcriptions for all songs analysed in this thesis, as well a multitude of other songs from the catalogues of Carter, Minnie and Tharpe would be a worthy project, both for continued analysis and performance/pedagogical purposes.

In closing, it is hoped that the efforts of this project have successfully illuminated the great skill and innovation of Maybelle Carter, Memphis Minnie and Sister Rosetta Tharpe, three woman who can be considered pioneers of the guitar in popular music. Additionally, it is
hoped that this study has positively addressed, in small part, the need for “serious and on-going academic study” (Dawe 2010, p. 41) of the instrument, providing relevant knowledge and an analytical framework for future research of a similar nature.
Glossary

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Idiolect. Style at the most local of levels, or the stylistic fingerprints of an individual musician (Moore 2012).

Idiotechne. A musician’s instrumental craft in relation to their idiom.

Idiotechnique. A unique or identifying facet of a player’s idiotechne.

Mapping. A compositional technique in which the pitch content of a guitar solo is directly related to physical chord shapes on the guitar neck.

Master riff. A riff that recurs across many songs in a player’s catalogue.

Master gesture. A sonic or somatic musical event that recurs across many songs in a player’s catalogue.

Musical gesture. A brief sonic or somatic musical event.

Performative gesture. A visually appealing physical gesture that reinforces a musical gesture.

Riff. A repeated short melodic/rhythmic phrase.

Seed riff (or seed). A short melodic phrase or riff that is used as a starting point for multiple ensuing phrases (Mermikides 2010).

Sonic norms. The harmonic, melodic and rhythmic vocabulary traditionally used within a particular style, such as pentatonicism in blues or heightened chromaticism in jazz.

Somatic norms. The physical techniques and expressive gestures related specifically to guitar playing, such as string bends, glissandi or cross-string articulations.
## Appendix A

### Maybelle Carter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recording Date</th>
<th>Track</th>
<th>Section Transcribed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>‘Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow’ (BVE 39750-2)</td>
<td>• Verse 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Guitar break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>‘Single Girl, Married Girl’, (BVE 39754-2)</td>
<td>• Opening break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Verse 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>‘Keep On The Sunnyside’ (BVE 45022-1)</td>
<td>• Verse 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>‘Little Darling, Pal of Mine’ (BVE 45021-2)</td>
<td>• Opening break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>‘Meet My By The Moonlight, Alone’ (BVE 45020-2)</td>
<td>• Opening break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>‘Wildwood Flower’ (BVE 45029-1)</td>
<td>• Opening guitar break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Verse 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Break 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>‘Little Moses’ (BVE 49860-2)</td>
<td>• Verse 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>‘The Cannonball’ (BVE 59979-1)</td>
<td>• Guitar break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>‘My Old Cottage Home’ (BVE 69346-2)</td>
<td>• Opening break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Verse 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>‘Jealous Hearted Me’ (Decca 61137-A)</td>
<td>• Opening break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>‘My Dixie Darling’ (Decca 61128-A)</td>
<td>• Opening break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>‘You are My Flower’, (Decca 64101-A)</td>
<td>• Opening break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Verse 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>‘Buddies in the Saddle’ (Okeh C 3351-1)</td>
<td>• Guitar Break</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Memphis Minnie

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recording Date</th>
<th>Track</th>
<th>Section Transcribed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>‘When the Levee Breaks’ (Columbia 14439-D)</td>
<td>• Opening solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Verse 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>Bumble Bee’ (Vocalion 1476)</td>
<td>• Opening solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Verse 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>‘Can I Do It For You? Part 1’ (Vocalion 1523)</td>
<td>• Opening solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>‘I’m Gonna Bake My Biscuits’ (Vocalion 1512)</td>
<td>• Opening solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>‘New Dirty Dozen’ (Vocalion 1618)</td>
<td>• Opening solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>‘She Wouldn’t Give Me None’ (Vocalion 1576)</td>
<td>• Opening solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>Crazy Cryin’ Blues’ (Vocalion 1678)</td>
<td>• Opening Solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>‘Socket Blues’ (Vocalion 1688)</td>
<td>• Opening solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>‘My Butcher Man’ (Okeh 8948)</td>
<td>• Opening solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Verse 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Verse 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Closing solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>‘Give It To Me In My Hand (Can I Go Home With You?)’ (Decca 7023)</td>
<td>• Opening solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>‘Dirty Mother For You’ (Decca 7048)</td>
<td>• Opening solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• First solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Second solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>‘I’m Waiting On You’ (as Texas Tessie, Bluebird B-6141)</td>
<td>• Chorus and bridge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>chord chart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recording Date</td>
<td>Track</td>
<td>Section Transcribed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>‘Reachin’ Pete’ (Decca 7102)</td>
<td>Opening solo, Main solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>‘Selling My Pork Chops’ (Bluebird B-6199)</td>
<td>Verse chart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>‘Man, You Won’t Give Me No Money’ (Vocalion 03474)</td>
<td>Opening solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>‘You Can’t Rule Me’ (Vocalion 03697)</td>
<td>Opening solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>‘Call the Fire Wagon’ (Vocalion 04858)</td>
<td>Opening solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>‘Lonesome Shack Blues’ (Okeh 05728)</td>
<td>Opening solo, Main solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>‘In My Girlish Days’ (Okeh 06410)</td>
<td>Opening solo, Main solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>‘Looking the World Over’ (Okeh 06707)</td>
<td>Opening solo, Verse 1, Main solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>‘Me and My Chauffer Blues’ (Okeh 06288)</td>
<td>Opening solo, Main solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>‘Rock Me’ (Decca 2243)</td>
<td>Verse and chorus chord chart, Opening solo, Verse 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>‘That’s All’ (Decca 2503)</td>
<td>Opening solo, Verse 1, Main solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>‘This Train’ (Decca 64882)</td>
<td>Intro solo, Verse 1, Main solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>‘That’s All’ (Decca 18496)</td>
<td>Main solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>‘Down By The Riverside’ (AFRS Jubilee Broadcasts J38)</td>
<td>Main solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>‘Strange Things Happening Every Day’ (Decca 8669)</td>
<td>Verse, Chorus chart, Opening solo, Verse 1, Main solo</td>
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<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>‘Up Above My Head’ (Solo guitar and voice version)</td>
<td>Verse 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1962-3</td>
<td>‘Up Above My Head’ (TV Gospel Time programme)</td>
<td>Verse 1, Main solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1962-3</td>
<td>‘Down by the Riverside’ (TV Gospel Time programme)</td>
<td>Intro solo, Main solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>‘Didn’t It Rain’ (Blues and Gospel Train - Live)</td>
<td>Intro solo, Main solo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure A.1 Table of original transcriptions created for this thesis.
Married girl, she wears just any kind.

Oh, she

Married girl,
Figure B.1  The Carter Family ‘Single Girl, Married Girl’, (BVE 39754-2, 1927. Track-time 0:23-0:50). Verse 1 with annotation of melodic shadowing and deviations.

Figure B.2  The Carter Family ‘Little Darling, Pal of Mine’ (BVE 45021-2, 1928. Track time 0:00-0:19). Opening slide guitar break.
Figure B.3  The Carter Family ‘Little Darling, Pal of Mine’ (BVE 45021-2, 1928). Chorus vocal line (0:19-0:37) and opening slide break lead line (0:00-0:18). Melodic comparison with annotation of melodic deviations.
Figure B.4  The Carter Family ‘My Dixie Darling’ (Decca 61128-A, 1936. Track time 0:00-0:22). Opening flatpicked guitar break with annotation of embellishments.
Figure B.5  The Carter Family ‘My Dixie Darling’ (Decca 61128-A, 1936). Verse 1 vocal line (1:05-1:28) and opening guitar break lead line (0:00-0:22). Melodic comparison with annotation of melodic deviations (original key: Ab major)
Figure B.6  The Carter Family ‘Buddies in the Saddle’ (Okeh C 3351-1, 1940. Track time 0:38-0:55).
Flatpicked lead guitar break.
Appendix C: Chapter 3 Supplementary Examples

Figure C.1  ‘Give It To Me In My Hand (Can I Go Home With You?)’ (Decca 7023, 1934. Track time 0:00 - 0:12). Early period opening solo in E major with annotation of melodic mapping.

Figure C.2  Memphis Minnie ‘Dirt Dauber Blues’ (Vocalion 1638, 1930). Early period opening solo in E major with annotation of melodic mapping.
Figure C.3  Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe 'Socket Blues' (Vocalion 1688, 1932. Track time 0:00-0:28). Early period opening solo in G major with annotation of melodic mapping.
Figure C.4  Memphis Minnie ‘In My Girlish Days’ (Okeh 06410, 1941. Track time 1:47 – 2:09). Late period main solo in G major with annotation of melodic mapping and master riffs.
Figure C.5  Memphis Minnie, ‘Reachin’ Pete’ (Decca 7102, 1935. Track time: 1:35-2:00).  
Fingerstyle main solo.
Appendix D: Chapter 4 Supplementary Material

I wanna tell you the natural fact, that a man don’t understand that биле.

ble... now, and that’s all

But he better have religion now,

I (type 1)   IV (type 1.2)   IV (type 1)
I (type 1.1)   IV (type 1.2)
I (type 1)   V7 (type 1.2)
Figure D.1   Sister Rosetta Tharpe ‘That’ All’ (Decca 2503, 1938. Track time 0:12-0: 36). Verse 1 with annotation of master chord shapes and embellishing gestures.

Figure D.2   Sister Rosetta Tharpe, ‘This Train’. (Decca 2558, 1939. Track time 0:00-0:10). Opening solo with annotation of recurrent musical gestures.
Figure D.3  Sister Rosetta Tharpe ‘This Train’ (Decca 2558, 1939. Track time 1:23-1:49) Main solo with annotation of recurrent musical gestures.


Riddle, L. (1963) Interview with Mike Seeger. 27 October. Mike Seeger Collection/Southern Folklife Collection Field Notes, 5616 Side B.


