

GERALD WILLIAMS

The Blues: *Where Love Ends Badly*

IN PARIS OF THE 1960s, Mae Mercer reigned at the Blues Bar—one of Maurice Girodias's four restaurants, neighboring his notorious Olympia Press on rue Saint-Séverin. Her fans were legion. The Beatles often came to hear her. Her thump&throb delivery of the blues was like no other. It was the real thing. It was sometimes inaccurately described as “gut-wrenching.” It probably soared, though, from her thighs to her Rubenesque hips, then syncopated there briefly before launching itself full-force to her at-the-ready larynx. The resulting sonorous growl, its rapturous profundity, cautioned as well as excited—and still does on CD and YouTube. For most audiences, attending her performance was a transformative adventure. Danger excites. At the risk of losing all things morally dear, the trespassing listener felt compelled, nonetheless, to proceed—to remain in league with the inherent threat of Mercer's spell until the song's finish. The journey dared by some or many could be likened to a quest for truth—one that stuns while quelling recessive pain—an aural opioid whose effect on the affected might well have seemed everlasting.

She was beautiful. Broad-hipped and very broad-shouldered, back straight as a caryatid's, she must have been nearly six feet. Her black hair—shiny, banged—was worn like a helmet: Louise Brooks, sort of. Her presence was undeniably commanding. It ordered you to watch and listen . . . and you did.

She died on October 29, 2008, in Northridge, California—a great distance from Battleboro, North Carolina, where she was born June 12, 1932, and ran away from at age fifteen. I met her in Paris when I was the editor at the Olympia Press. I'd been hired after translating *The Bedside Odyssey* from French. Maurice Girodias, my employer (and, later, a good friend for over thirty years), was dating Mae Mercer and, possibly at or around the same time, Marpessa Dawn, of the Cannes-winning film *Black Orpheus*. Mae and Marpessa probably knew of each other; expat Paris is a small town. Whether or not they knew that they were being two-timed is anyone's guess.

I'd sometimes run into Mae when she stopped by the office. Something always clicks on some level when one black person meets another, maybe even more so in a foreign land. I was then in my twenties—an insecure eager beaver, desirous of making good because at that age it was the thing to do. She was nice to me. We small-talked. Although her speaking voice was shylike, I could discern a husky, defensive undertone. I can't say that I knew her well, but rather that I got to know of her through Girodias, her boss and suitor. The late basketball legend Wilt "The Stilt" Chamberlain, also vying for her affection, referred to his rival as Girodi-ASS, sometimes to his face.

Eventually Mae dropped The Stilt to become Girodias's main squeeze. He was her boss, after all. Through him, she could do what she loved doing most: sing the blues. And with Mae filling the Blues Bar night after night, Girodias was able to segue from illiquidity (caused by Olympia Press debts and lawsuits) to bona fide solvency (for a while, anyway). Mae was good for Girodias sexually, and definitely good for business. (Payday for press staffers like me had finally ceased to be illusory.) He was good for her, too—at least where her career was concerned.

"WHILE I WAS PUTTING on my tuxedo, I kept telling Mae to hurry or we'd be late. She was still taking a bath," Girodias told me, one night after work. "She mocked me, then when I went to the bathroom to further insist that she dry herself and get dressed, she grabbed my lapels and yanked me down into the tub. Her stamina is remarkable!" Girodias loved this sort of thing—a show of uncharacteristic behavior.

Perhaps not so much, though, on that night where *La Mercer* attempted to slaughter him with the spike heel of her shoe. They'd had a serious misunderstanding. Wielding the shoe, she at first attacked the windshield of his car. Then he managed, somehow, to pull her into his vehicle. Inconsolable, she continued to misbehave as he drove to her hotel. It was there, in the lobby, that Mae went ballistic, striking Girodias in the face with that spike heel whenever she could.

"She gashed my face many times. There was blood all over the place."

Mae chased Girodias from one corner of the lobby to the other, while the desk clerk looked on, no doubt immensely amused.

"I was slipping and sliding in my own blood. The floor looked like an abstract painting."

At one point, though, Girodias stopped running. Shielding his face with one fist, he turned around and slugged her in the jaw with the

other—all to no avail. The chase continued. When the novelty of this guignolesque performance began wearing thin, the desk clerk phoned the local *gendarmerie*. It took several policemen to escort the still-enraged Mae into the paddy wagon. She was released only after she'd managed to cool down.

While watching her sing “Careless Love” on YouTube recently, I finally understood how deeply she'd known its lines: *You made me throw my old friend down, / That's why I sing this song of hate, and You brought the wrong man into this life of mine.*

QUITTING THE BLUES BAR and Girodias in one fell swoop had Mae briefly in a fix. Deliverance came in the form of a wealthy French noblewoman—a countess? a baroness?—who whisked Mae away to her luxurious compound in California. There the Frenchwoman waited on her, hand and foot. When Iris Owens (a.k.a. Harriet Daimler, the famed Olympia Press author of *The Woman Thing*, *The Organization*, and *Innocence*) paid Mae a visit, she found her lounging comfortably poolside, while her enamored noblewoman—her knight in shining armor—catered to her every need.

“Friends refer to her as ‘Mae’s white slave,’” Iris later told me. When she related all this to Girodias, it must have been painful, reminding him as it did of their tumultuous breakup.

This noblewoman quite possibly had showbiz connections and she may have played an instrumental role in jump-starting Mae’s film career in the U.S. (I’m guessing). Mae had acted before, small roles, for the most part, in French films and TV, while still at the Blues Bar, even before she had adequate knowledge of the craft. When hiring her first for his *Dirty Harry* and then for *Beguiled*, film director Don Siegel may have been influenced by his star Clint Eastwood (I’m guessing again). Eastwood, a jazz enthusiast himself with great respect for African American music, would have naturally been drawn to someone of Mae’s professional caliber.

Both films were hits. Critics were duly impressed by Mae and later commended her performance in French director Louis Malle’s controversial *Pretty Baby*. Matters were going so well for Mae in Hollywood that she put singing aside to focus more effectively on her acting career. After playing in a number of the then popular TV series, e.g., *Kung Fu*, *Mannix*, *Ironsides*, and, later, *ER*, she moved on to prove herself a competent film producer. Her documentary about the prominent Black Panther Angela Davis—*Angela Davis: Portrait of a Revolutionary*—still astounds.

And then she suddenly vanished. News of her whereabouts, her acting or singing career, became mysteriously scant. Her obituary in the *LA Times* mentioned that she'd married twice, had had several children and that, in addition to suffering from a long-term illness, she'd had two mini-strokes. She'd died at home in her sleep. Her good friend Reginald D. Brown found her the next morning. He called her "a classic blues singer," and that she certainly was. He's currently working on a documentary covering her charmed, fearless, and adventurous life.

AMONG MY MANY letters and papers from Girodias, there is a chapter that he wisely did not include in the published version of his three-volume autobiography. It harshly details the many humiliations Mae caused him to suffer during their volatile romance. He had to get this off his chest. She'd really gotten to him.

Mae, given her exceptional command of the blues, her spearheaded drive, and passable common sense, most likely never looked back—and never once gave Girodias a second thought.