

IRREGULAR BEATS

MARIA WOODFORD

by Matthew Crain

Written While Listening to Maria Woodford Sing "Ball 'n' Chain" at Blues Week, Augusta, Georgia, June 2012:

God, to have been there (Tenant house? Alley? Loafers' bench? Brothel foyer?) the moment he or she – a genius of metaphor – blurted out, "Blue" in answer to, "How ya feeling?" And then maybe this same genius (Calloused hands? Manicured nails? Overalls? Tuxedo?) began chording in triplets with the first two notes tied, a chunk-a-chunk rhythm that will put the lamp where its own head blocks the light and what's it to you if it goes blind; a weary, up-from-nothing rhythm that makes changing from the tonic to the sub-dominant a tooth-and-claw triumph. (But note how quickly your breaking free has led to your restraint, and your "victory" was all a plot to put you under the magnifying glass and burn you to a cinder with the dominant chord whose tones spelled *f-a-t-e* are actually the overtones from an ultra low frequency chord spelled *c-h-a-r-a-c-t-e-r*); a mesmerizing, sexual rhythm that makes you hike your skirt and back up to the gas heater and so what if I set my stockings on fire and burn off my girdle; a rhythm that makes your hips swing on their own, makes your eyes close on their own, makes your masks fall flat like old-time Hollywood storefront facades, and there you stand amid the dust as naked as the day you were born and who would have guessed that you're a poet and have got a lot of things to say and want to tell everybody exactly how you feel. – All because of tied triplets and a metaphor.

All right, here's mine. If Maria Woodford were a thing, she would be a tin can connected to a long string stretching back to Ida Cox, Mary Johnson, and Ma Rainey, a party line of

classic blues singers, women who do indeed pitch wang-dang-doodles all night long (Seeking 2-Hour Daddys, 10-Minute Papas need not apply); women who ask men pointblank, Do you think I'm stupid? Do you think I don't know what kind of s--- you're trying to pull? Maybe I'm biased but, Muddy Waters and Robert Johnson excepted, men blues singers seem to sing to themselves alone in a room after the fight and now, the danger passed, they rewrite what happened. Women blues singers seem to sing while the fight is still going on, looking you straight in the eye as they stand their ground. Men blues singers can sound like they're just singing "the blues", but women blues singers don't have time for quotation marks and sound like they *paid* for every word coming out of their mouth. This credential, this true bill, let's call it, comes exclusively through tone. Maria Woodford has that true bill.

Written at the Bar While Listening to Maria Woodford Sing at Maxim's 22, Easton, Pennsylvania, October 2013:

June Thomas, keyboard: Schroeder meets Pinetop Perkins – She can play the legs off of that KORG. And what backing vocals!

Dennis Gruenling, electric harp: Half horse, half devil, nasty as James Cotton.

Maria Woodford, acoustic guitar and vocals: "I got big ovaries, baby. Big enough to speak my mind!" . . . "If I die and my soul gets lost/Ain't nobody's fault but mine!"

What a band. Who's idea was it to sing "You Are My Sunshine" in a minor key? Thomas's voice seeping in under Woodford's as she sings, "You'll never know, dear, how much I love you" makes the hair stand up on your arm. Then the harp flits past like a bat, and love gives itself up for another inspection.

