

Mickey CHAMPION

One of Roy Milton's Gals

by Opal Louis Nations

Last year, on Saturday August 18, my wife and I celebrated my 60th birthday at Lunaria's Jazz Club on Santa Monica Boulevard in L.A. On the entertainment program that night was the legendary **Mickey Champion** decked out and looking sassy in what might pass as a white summer bridal dress. Backed by her band, the **Black Shadows**, the short, heavy-set Mickey gave a gut-bucket performance of steamy ballads and hard-assed tunes. At times she would flirt with the fellas and lifted her dress or draped a leg over a chair, at other times she would assert her womanhood with a swaggering look of fierce independence. Like a boxer trying to weigh up an opponent's next move, Champion light-stepped through the crowd—a stalking tiger. With her keenness for booze, her fondness to party, and zest for life, Champion with a never-ending store of energy has so far managed to burn out anyone who tries to follow after her.

Born **Mildred Sallier** in Lake Charles, Louisiana some time in 1926 (she is reluctant to give out her exact birth date), Champion spent her childhood days under the care of a number of aunts. Her grandfather was a bishop of the Lake Charles C.M.E. Church at which the mighty-piped Champion became a singing sensation. She was soon holding forth with a vocal trio in high school, and was already good enough to impress the renowned bandleader **Louis Jordan**. Jordan came to concertize in Lake Charles, and Champion sang a song for him. "He came to my aunt's house to take me along with him," says Champion, "but my aunt and uncle were not gonna let me go." Although vocalizing was her passion and she had often given little impromptu concerts without microphone, singing was not something she wanted to make her profession. In 1943, just out of high school, she met and married **Norman Champion**. The pair moved out to Los Angeles in 1945. L.A.'s Central Avenue just after the war was a thriving hotbed of musical talent the likes of which have not been seen before or since. The clubs on Central attracted major talent like **Count Basie** and **Duke Ellington**. For a young singer like Champion, it was like having the run of a musical candy store. "I'd just go up on Central and look at the other singers," says Champion. "**Billy Holiday**, **Jimmy Witherspoon**, **T-Bone Walker**, I'd go and hear 'em all." She would go out and see **Dinah Washington** at the Elks Club.

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

By the late 1940s, Champion was appearing at swank clubs like **Slim Jenkins' Place** in Oakland. She toured widely, sharing the bill with Billie Holiday at the Greystone Ballroom, as well as the Winterland Palace in Detroit and with **Sarah Vaughn** in Kansas City. When **Johnny Otis** and **Little Esther's** release of "Double Crossing Blues" on Savoy Records looked



Mickey circa 1957 (Photo courtesy Opal Nations)

like being a major sensation during the spring of 1950, Otis had a problem. A large volume of work was coming in but he could not fill the engagements as Esther was only fourteen years old. This meant at most venues she was under age. After catching Mickey's performance at Slim Jenkins', Otis knew he had a solution. Mickey could sing just like, and as well as, Little Esther, and not only did she resemble her by appearance, both singers were the same height and build. No one would know, thought Otis, if Mickey went out as Esther. After all, few people had seen Little Esther's photograph. As it happened, things turned out perfectly, and Mickey filled in at Sweet's Ballroom in Oakland and a few other Bay Area venues.

In September 1950, Mickey toured with **Percy Mayfield** after he had recorded his eventual million seller, "Please Send Me Someone to Love." She was soon noticed by **Roy Milton**, with whom she cut at least ten titles for the **Bihari** brothers at Modern Records. Despite the extremely high quality of her work, Modern chose only to release six sides on three singles between October 1950 and February 1952. Milton's interest in Mickey went beyond the usual professional relationship. The couple had an affair and a son, Jeff, was born. Meanwhile, she appeared with **The Milton Band** on the **Frank Bull** and **Gene Norman's** First Annual Blues and Rhythm Show at the Shrine Auditorium on L.A.'s West

Jefferson Boulevard alongside the likes of **Dinah Washington**, **Helen Humes**, and **Pee Wee Crayton**. It was Gene Norman who wanted to manage Champion but she preferred to keep him out of her affairs. Joining **Herb Jeffries'** and **Jack McVea's** band, she played the Elks Hall. By March 1951 Champion had dropped the "Little" from her name and was appearing on a **Ben Waller** revue with **Jimmy Grissom** and **Little Willie Littlefield** at different venues around the San Francisco Bay Area. In April 1951 Mickey was back at Jack's Basket Room on Central with **Smokey Lynn** and Jimmy Grissom, sharing time on the show. **Maurice Simon's Orchestra**, featuring Jack "Open the door, Richard" McVea on tenor sax, supported the proceedings.

Mickey signed a contract with Aladdin Records in December 1951 and cut one session, arranged and conducted by **Maxwell Davies and his All Stars**. Two releases ensued over a period of four months during the 1952 summer season. Both singles were well received in the trades, but because Mickey always did what she wanted, and that her greatest fear was flying, she could not effectively get behind her recordings to promote them. Consequently, good work went unnoticed. In a last ditch effort to give Mickey one more chance, Score (an Aladdin subsidiary) included the four songs on a Billie Holiday album that surfaced in 1957. By then it was too late. Mickey stayed with the **Roy Milton Band** off and on for seven years. In

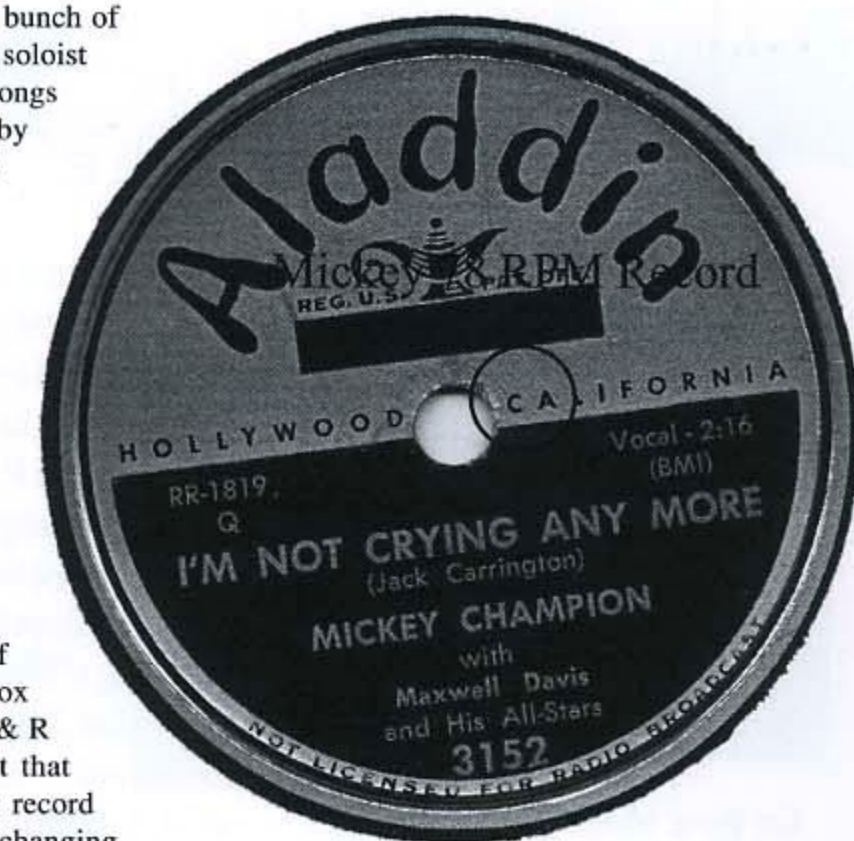
April 1954, the pair played a two-week engagement at The Royal Room in L.A. In the summer, they worked a series of one-nighters through Texas, Louisiana and Oklahoma. After an appearance at The Savoy Ballroom in L.A., Mickey and Milton were off on another series of engagements all over the West Coast. Following in the footsteps of the **Johnny Otis R & B** "Touring Caravan" concept, Milton gathered Mickey, the **Flairs**, **Queens** and **Penguins** for a package that would take the entourage up to Santa Barbara and onto San Pedro, El Paso, Tucson, Phoenix and back to Imperial, California.

A big party was held at The 5-4 Ballroom in May 1955 to celebrate Milton's twentieth anniversary in show biz. After a series of out of state engagements, Mickey and Milton signed with **Dootsie Williams'** Dootone Records. Williams saw fit only to issue one single on Mickey, the gloriously raunchy and jubilant "I'm a Woman," one of Mickey's finest moments on wax. Although the record got off to a promising start, somehow sales figures stalled. It was only when **Peggy Lee** recorded the song for Capitol in 1963 (as a cover of **Christine Kittrell's** excellent Vee Jay version) that anyone took notice. The flip was "Bam-a-lam." Dootone did little to further Milton and Mickey's careers, and by October 1956, with most of Milton's long-serving band crew gone, he and Mickey switched

over to King Records in Cincinnati. With a bunch of new Milton Band recruits, plus second female soloist Inez Coleman, the aggregation recorded four songs at the Cincinnati studios. Two were fronted by Mickey, a remake of "Bam-a-lam" plus "You're Gonna Suffer," the latter being the only song King chose to put out along with Milton singing "One Zippy Zam." The record bombed.

A second King session was cut in L.A. without Mickey in February 1957. Things were not working out with Mickey and Milton. Somehow the chemistry was not happening any more. On the third and last King session, held in Cincinnati in July 1957, Mickey and Milton dueted on a cover of **Huey "Piano" Smith's** "Rocking Pneumonia and Boogie Woogie Flu" as well as a remake of Milton's 1946 million seller for the Juke Box label, "R.M. Blues." One wonders where A & R men **Ralph Bass** or **Henry Glover** were at that time. They were sorely needed. The King record sank. Mickey quit Milton and because of changing trends, The Roy Milton Band did not record again for three years.

Mickey returned to her old stomping grounds, the welcoming lights of the night club circuit. She complained that despite signing contracts with major labels, they never called to record her.



praises the small, independent companies for pushing her as much as they could, but, in reality, she never thought recordings were of any importance to her. Mickey made another stab at re-recording "Bam-a-lam." It came out as the first of two singles cut for Lilly Records on L.A.'s East Florence Avenue in 1961. She recorded again in 1965 for the tiny Musette label on Logan Street. She retired from music after this to raise her seven children. (She had married twice.) After her kids were able to take care of themselves, she found herself a job as cook for the L.A. Unified School District. She loves cooking and is really good at it. Now and again Mickey either sat in on, or came out on, a weekend club performance. In late June 1998, at the urging of her friend, singer **Barbara Morrison**, Mickey played the Monterey Blues Festival and demolished the crowd.

In April 1999 Mickey was filmed live on stage at **Jonathan Hodges'** famed Blues venue, Babe & Ricky's Inn on Leimart Boulevard. The resulting movie documentary, "Champion Blues" directed by **Aletha Rodgers**, has won awards at festivals across the country. In May 1999, Mickey returned to Babe & Ricky's Inn to record under Hodges' direction a live CD entitled "I am Your Living Legend." She has also recorded a second CD, "Live at the Living Room," for R & M Sound. Hodges, who currently manages Mickey's affairs and celebrated come-back, has her booked regularly at The Living Room on Crenshaw Boulevard, Lunaria's on Santa Monica Boulevard, The Three of Clubs, Spaceland, Farfalla on La Brea, and of course Babe & Ricky's Inn, L.A.'s longest running night club. We close with an amazing account of one of Mickey's stunts at a recent club appearance. During her set, midway through a song, and singing all the while, Mickey left the mike, and walked off stage into the audience. She then headed slowly for the door, walked out to the street where she made for the liquor store on the corner. She entered the liquor store, bought a bottle of booze, and strolled all the way back to the stage where the band had played non stop since her departure. Never once did she break from singing her song, and when she was through, she took a long swig from the well-deserved bottle.

Opal Louis Nations
August, 2002

With help from Dahle Scott and Aletha Rodgers

Mickey today
(Photo courtesy Opal Nations)

