

Ida Cox may be the bluesiest of all the blues singers, but that's just the beginning of her story.

Music researcher and author Derrick Stewart-Baxter summed up Ida Cox this way –

“Only show business and vaudeville in particular, could have created such an unbelievable character as Ida Cox. Certainly, no author would have dared to invent her, and if he had done so, he would have never put such a wildly improbable person into a book.”

Maybe it's because of that improbability, that Ida Cox has never received her just due as an artist. Paramount billed her as the “Uncrowned Queen of the Blues.” As if that were a compliment.

Though she worked in the reflected glory of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith – Ida Cox had a talent that threw its own long shadows.

She was one of the biggest stars for Paramount Records in the 20s - and few - if any - were able to imitate her.

Ida Cox looked and moved on stage like the queen of vaudeville - her wardrobe often included a tiara and a cape – but her southern roots are still there in the music - for everyone to hear.

In Ida Cox the listener can hear a premonition of the solo blues men of the 30s, because Ida Cox – sang the blues – pure blues - unlike anyone else.

Ida Cox was born Ida Prather in Toccoa, GA – sometime between 1888 and 1896.

Though she told reporters she was born in Knoxville, she actually grew up near the Riverside Plantation, in GA where her family worked. The estate was owned by the Prather family – which is where she got her maiden name.

Cox began singing in the African Methodist Church when she was a child, leaving home at 14 to tour the minstrel circuit with the Black and Tan Minstrels, the Florida Orange Blossom Minstrels, the Rabbit Foot Minstrels, and the Silas Green Show.

She started out playing Topsy – a character from Uncle Tom's Cabin- a traditional vaudeville role – often played in blackface. As her stage presence developed she became a shrewd and quick comedian as well. Within a few years - Ida Cox left the role of Topsy behind and transformed herself into a blues singer.

In 1908 – Ida Prather married Adler Cox – a trumpet player with the Florida Orange Blossoms – but he died in World War I.

In 1920 she left the Vaudeville circuit to headline at Atlanta's 81 Theater with Jelly Roll Morton.

Her experience and wit from years in vaudeville quickly earned her a star billing, on the TOBA circuit, where she was sometimes billed on the as the "Sepia Mae West."

She married again - to a man named Eugene Williams - and had a daughter before that marriage ended in divorce.

In March of 1923 – her live performance at the Beale Street Palace was aired on WMC radio in Memphis – if the date's correct it predates Bessie Smith's historic in-studio performance on the station later that same year.

With her popularity growing all across the south Paramount Records signed Ida Cox - and between September 1923 and October 1929 she recorded 78 tracks for the label. Starting with Graveyard Dream Blues in 1923.

Like many artists of the era - Cox also recorded for Broadway Records and Silvertone (a division of Sears and Roebuck) using the pseudonyms Kate Lewis, Velma Bradley and Jane Smith.

In those days, artists didn't think much of records. They weren't that big a deal - just another gig - and no one really had any idea what the business would become. Plus - artists were rarely paid the royalties they were due on the back end - so they recorded wherever they could - for the flat rate they were paid up front.

Ida Cox was no different in that respect.

Though she mostly sang straight blues – her records are more traditional than even Ma Rainey or Bessie Smith - she recorded with the best musicians of the jazz age – including – King Oliver, Lovie Austin, Papa Charlie Jackson and Jesse Crump.

Which may be why people think of her has a vaudeville style singer, but even a cursory listen - reveals the sound of the delta throughout her recordings – not just jazz tinged with blues – or vaudeville songs with a blue slant - but the full 12 bar blues form in all its glory.

Ida Cox wrote most of her own songs – primarily aimed at black female audiences with a subject matter about dignity and respect.

Her lyrics are sharp tongued, and reflect the realities of black female life in early 20th century America, often talking about politics, female independence, and sexuality.

Ida Cox saw a world that didn't respect black women. True to form - she did something about it. Her song "Wild Women Don't Get The Blues," became an early feminist anthem.

She was always herself. The rules didn't apply. Neither did the law.

She carried four or five grand in travelers checks in her bra.

One night she saw a curtain she wanted – the problem was – it was part of the set at a theater where she was performing.

That didn't stop her. She sent a boy to take it down - and take it home.

All was well until the stage manager called for the curtain in the middle of the show – revealing nothing but the back wall of the theater.

She once told another classic blues legend Victoria Spivey – “just sing “Lady Be Good,” I'm the blues singer in this show.”

Spivey, we assume, sang the Gershwin show tune, because even Spivey admitted she couldn't touch Ida Cox as a blues singer.

In 1927, she married Jesse “Tiny” Crump – a blues pianist on the TOBA circuit. Crump became a collaborator both in writing songs and in the studio.

Her business acumen was smart and sophisticated. She created and managed her own touring company called “Raising Cain,” after the biblical story in Genesis – and the resulting idiom – meaning to cause a commotion.

“Raising Cain” was so popular it became the first TOBA show – to open at the Apollo in Harlem. Her tent show toured from the end of the 20s into the 30s, and included 16 chorus girls, comics, and backup singers.

Like the rest of the industry the Great Depression made success hard to find.

It didn't stop Ida Cox though. She and Crump reorganized and rebranded as “Darktown Scandals” – continued touring until 1939.” That same year - she performed at Carnegie Hall, as part of John Hammond's “From Spirituals to Swing,” show – and it introduced her to a new audience.

After a stroke in 1944 - she returned to live with her daughter in Knoxville, and sang exclusively in the church choir for the next decade and a half.

Ida Cox came out of retirement in 1961 to record “Blues for Rampart Street,” live at Radio City Music Hall – with an all-star band featuring Roy Eldridge and Coleman Hawkins.

Her Feminist anthem “Wild Women Don't Have the Blues,” was covered by Lyle Lovett on his 1999 “Live in Texas,” album with Francine Reed – his longtime collaborator.

Ida Cox died in Knoxville, Tennessee on November 10th, 1967, fortunately her music lives on.

Ida Cox – The Founding Mothers Playlist

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5mYIKBcHY5VkcY5AEce4UR?si=287dfc686d4a4af1>