



Sarah Baker

## Tina and Me

Tina Turner was my earliest idol, and not the least because I felt akin to her. I hated the racist cultural differences that kept me from knowing her in Memphis, and hated my religious upbringing that posited that I was worshipping the devil if I played the blues or even a fucking tritone. This split of the sacred and profane tortured many musicians including Thomas A. Dorsey (Ma Rainey's pianist and arranger) to my blues mentor, the late Jessie Mae Hemphill.

Tina appeared under the name "Little Ann" on her first record, Boxtop, in 1958, two years before she began to become world famous as the "Queen of Rock 'n' Roll." She died in Switzerland on May 24, 2023. Her death got me thinking about her and her career.

Born Anna Mae Bullock, she grew up near Brownsville, Tennessee, about 80 miles from Parsons, where I grew up. In those days, the towns were segregated. Signs on the public

restrooms read “White” and “Colored.” Blacks lived in separate sections. In my town, the “colored” section was called “Two-Foot.” Occasionally, we went there to get ironing done. My mother was a factory worker, but even poor white people like us could sometimes afford to pay a Black person to do their ironing. I like to think that when Anna Mae moved from Brownsville, a small town in West Tennessee, to Knoxville, a real city, her life improved.

Like me, she learned to sing in church, and both of us also learned from our respective sisters. Tina was raised by her strict grandparents in Knoxville after her parents separated. I grew up with a religious mother and father until 17 when I went away to college. As a girl and young woman, I went to church twice on Sundays for Sunday School, Training Union, and two sermons, and once on Wednesday nights to “prayer meeting.”

My relationships were less abusive than Tina’s. (Her husband, Ike, one-half of the “Ike and Tina Review,” was a notorious batterer.) A few times, I found myself lost in Memphis with no money. My senior year in college I married a pre-med student. We moved to Memphis in the fall of 1965 and by 1967 we were divorced. One night I was in a bar, “the Psycho Lounge (For People Who Need Help)” — at closing time with not one cent to call anyone. I borrowed a dime from a guy. I don’t remember who I called that night, but my ex-husband rescued me, and didn’t let me hear the end of it.

I never saw Tina in Memphis; I was in the opera world and I didn’t even know about the Handy Club where she performed with Ike, although I did sit in occasionally at the Sharecropper’s Club, singing jazz with the Tommy Ferguson Trio. I was fortunate enough, though, to see and hear Tina perform in a small auditorium at New Mexico State University, where I was working on a master’s in music. Her over-the-top high energy performance held me spellbound, mesmerized by this seemingly larger-than-life woman (in reality she was 5’4,” and so am I). By then I had abandoned my operatic ambitions, and formed a rock band, the Mother Fox, a controversial name that a local radio station decided too racy and refused to play our album on the radio.

Tina Turner gave me permission to be wild. The rumor at the NMSU show was that she wore no underwear under a very short mini skirt. I sat three rows back and could not tell for sure, but it did seem, yeah, maybe she didn’t. No one cared. We listened and watched. The reigning Goddess of my era; her un-reined feminist passion gave me freedom, too. Thanks to Tina, I’ll never again be without some cash in my wallet, a driver’s license, and once I was able to get them in 1974 with the passage of the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, at least two credit cards.

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Sarah Baker, who was born and raised in Tennessee, is a nationally renowned musician, songwriter and singer who performs the blues and jazz.