

Woody met Louise

by David James

Times were tough.

They met out on the right-of-way on Highway 61 heading south, each trying to hitch a ride to New Orleans where they might find work. Albert walked up to her lugging a saxophone in a scuffed up case. Mamie had old cloth suitcase. After handshake bona fides she told him she liked to sing and hoped she could catch on as a warbler in one of the French Quarter clubs. Albert smiled when she told him, but said he was surprised she'd be out hitchhiking (back then gals just didn't do that). Ladies mostly hung around in their hometowns waiting for suitors to change their maiden names. Mamie said prospects for that were slim in her town, Tunica, besides it made her weary thinking some guy would lord over her and govern the rest of her life.

After about five hours in the sun with no cars stopping to offer them a ride they pulled back from the road where under a shade tree, Albert took out his sax and he and Louise jumped on a song: "Stormy Weather". Albert told her that if he closed your eyes, he might think he was listening to Billie Holiday at The Cotton Club in Harlem. Mamie told him singing inside his sax melody made it easy. Right then and there they knew that they were a perfect team.

Sensing that getting a ride to New Orleans was unlikely, they picked up their stuff and trudged back into Natchez with a plan that was respectable back then because of the hard times. They spent the night in an empty, side-tracked boxcar and the next morning walked on over to the train station to start work their plan: busking. Offering up their music to passengers coming and going. After their first day Albert said to judge by the quarters and the occasional dollar bills dropped in Mamie's pill box hat lying there in front of them they made the right choice. Mamie said that it wasn't exactly heaven, but after a few good days they might could pick up enough change and get to take the train to New Orleans. Albert nodded and smiled.

