

Record: 1

Title: Mothers of invention. (cover story)
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Source: Rolling Stone; 11/13/97 Issue 773, p44, 5p, 9bw
Persistent link to this record: <http://0-search.epnet.com.library.lib.asu.edu:80/direct.asp?an=9711053726&db=a>
Database: Academic Search Elite

MOTHERS OF INVENTION

Women do talk; perhaps it's the intimacies and isolations of domestic life that have made them queens of the cut-to-the-bone colloquial. And before they dared press it on vinyl and send it to market, women had long told one another the unvarnished truth. If you think about it, the blues was the first serious public consciousness raising -- frank, sexy and mercifully non-PC. Since the first blues recordings were made by and for African-Americans, it wasn't necessary to deeply encode the plain facts. There is no mistaking what Bessie Smith meant when she sang, "I need a little sugar in my bowl."

America's very first rush of popular-record buying was ignited in the '20s by the talents of black female blues artists who were telling it like it was, is and damn well ought to be. Folks just had to have it, at home and in dirt-floor juke joints. Call these women the true Mothers of Invention - blues pioneers whose echoes are still heard in the most avant singer/songwriters and in the primmest Orlon'd girl groups.

Like the best of rock, theirs was not a studied sound. Largely recording in the South, in makeshift studios, they were strong women singing hard truths in a 12-bar blues format. That three-line-stanza song form came out of Africa and moved north along the Mississippi Delta; it is the root of all pop, from rhythm and blues to acid rock to reggae to rap. And like the drums that first thrummed it across the Senegalese skies, it was talking music.

In the '90s, African-American women can swap truths in spirited, Oprah-inspired reading groups such as Go On Girl. But listen to Ma Rainey warn, "Trust no man," Mae Glover declare, "I ain't givin' nobody none," or Ida Cox sing, "Wild women don't have the blues," and it's clear these women weren't waiting to exhale. They could blow a lyric and a feeling from Augusta to Kansas City under conditions that would make today's divas bolt for cover under the massage table. Stylists? Maybe some crone heating a hair iron in an alley behind those colored-only boardinghouses. Security? A razor laced to the instep of a dainty boot.

It stands to reason that on the rough and ready Theater Owners' Booking Association (also known as Toby Time or Tough on Black Asses), a black vaudeville circuit covering most Southern cities, the best rose to the top on vocal firepower and strength of character. Ma Rainey

was born to a pair of road-toughened minstrel troupers and at 18 married William "Pa" Rainey, who took her on the road working levee camps, tent shows and cabarets. They were billed as Rainey and Rainey, Assassimators of the Blues.

Ma's massacres are now credited as the crucial link between rural Southern blues and the more sophisticated versions later sung by Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters. Ma's delivery was direct, down-home and folksy -- pure country. But she was professional. And her presentation of self prefigured rock's most outrageous impulses for puttin' on the glitz: Starting at the top, with stiff horsehair wigs framing her battered face, Ma accessorized with a brio that would make the Spice Girls gasp. A contemporary described the vision: "Ma was loaded with diamonds -- in her ears, round her neck, in a tiara on her head. Both hands were full of rocks, too. Her hair was wild, and she had gold teeth! What a sight!"

By all accounts, her generosity was also multiscarred. Debunking old myths that had Rainey "kidnapping" the young Bessie Smith for a traveling show, Chris Albertson's landmark 1972 biography of Smith reveals that the older Rainey was, in fact, "more like a mother to her" when they both toured with the Rabbit Foot Minstrels.

Bessie Smith lived just 43 years, from 1894 to 1937. Yet for the next half-century, in legend, plays and liner notes, she would be held up as the archetype of Woman Wronged. Even her death was shrouded in a myth that had her bleeding to death after a car crash when a whites-only hospital refused her admission. After careful scholarship and interviews with Smith's intimates, Albertson set the record straight. Smith was revealed as a woman with plenty of Trouble in Mind: a sizable drinking problem, abusive men and crushing racism. But she was never a passive victim; in her music and her life, Bessie Smith preferred dealing from strength.

For much of her career, she could command top rates. Amazingly, blueswomen were initially paid better than men. Smith could earn as much as \$200 a side -- nearly 15 times the average fee for a black male singer at the time. This is not to say she wasn't cheated, over and over. But if Smith got wind of it, you'd do well to have your insurance paid up. Having found that her pianist Clarence Williams had appropriated \$375 of hers, Smith -- close to 200 pounds of handsome, towering outrage -- cornered Williams, pounded him to the floor and kept whaling at him until he tore up their lopsided contract.

Racism was no match for Bessie in a mood. Put on display by a patronizing white grande dame who demanded a kiss in front of her society pals, Smith knocked madame on her astonished derri ffl8Are. On a Southern swing with her traveling show, she was informed that hooded KKK terrorists were at work outside, sabotaging the tent poles. "Some shit!" she snorted, and, according to Albertson's sources, she ran outside and faced them down alone, bellowing, "What the fuck you think you're doin'? I'll get the whole damn tent out here if I have to. You just pick up them sheets and run." And they did.

Like some '60s performers now confined to oldies shows, Bessie Smith suffered a dimming of her star when the Depression flattened box offices in the early '30s and restless, sophisticated black audiences cast off the blues as hopelessly old-fashioned. She sold the beloved private railroad car that had spared her some of the discomforts and humiliations of segregated travel

and took gigs in the lowest gin mills again. But at the time Smith died in a car accident in 1937, her career had been back on the rise. She had had no reservations about joining the swing era. Producer John Hammond was planning to record her with Count Basie on piano; Lionel Hampton wanted to work with her, and she had a new film contract. The hysteria at her Philadelphia funeral -- not unlike that which surrounded the rites for Supreme Florence Ballard, in 1976 -- was the grief of a community acknowledging the immensity of her achievement against ridiculous odds.

If Rainey and Smith were the Mother and the Empress, respectively, there was no shortage of titled blueswomen -- Little and Big Mamas, Canaries and Queens. Theirs was a genre where modesty got you nowhere -- mighty Chicago blueswoman Koko Taylor still bills herself, justifiably, as the Earthshaker. Among the more regal originals were Ida Cox, Sippie Wallace, Alberta Hunter, Ethel Waters, Victoria Spivey. Of course, there were scores more; some of their ghostly, piney-woods voices have been respectfully disinterred in archival collections. Just as many remain nameless. The blues may have been about endurance, but the popular-music marketplace has always been about change.

In 1970, a housewife's letter to the Philadelphia Inquirer called attention to the fact that Bessie Smith's grave, in nearby Mount Lawn Cemetery, had lain unmarked for more than three decades. The resulting publicity brought pledges from two women to share in the cost of erecting a marker: Juanita Green, a registered nurse who had scrubbed Smith's floors as a little girl, and Janis Joplin, the white rock singer who swore that she owed her own success to Smith's wellspring blues. The marble marker was set in place in August 1970, just two months before Joplin died.

It's no surprise that the echoes of early blueswomen would reach contemporary audiences largely through the music of white rockers. Bonnie Raitt virtually apprenticed herself to Sippie Wallace, performing and recording with her. Theirs was a genial, respectful collaboration. But Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton, who lived and performed until 1984, did not conceal her irritation over the riches that came to Elvis Presley and Janis Joplin with their remakes of her records "Hound Dog" and "Ball and Chain," respectively.

The Leiber and Stoller-penned hit "Hound Dog" made it to No. 1 on the R&B charts in 1953 for Thornton. But as she grumped to Rolling Stone's Ralph J. Gleason: "That song sold over 2 million copies. . . . I got one check for \$500, and I never seen another." Though she wrote "Ball and Chain," the royalties were assigned to her record company. Big Mama died frail, alcohol-ravaged and poor in a Los Angeles boardinghouse. Other blues musicians did respect Thornton's considerable chops, including her ease on the hitherto-unladylike harmonica and drums; the backup band for one of her later albums featured James Cotton and Muddy Waters.

Most serious blues guitarists also acknowledge the prowess of Memphis Minnie (born Lizzie Douglas), who began picking as a 5-year-old in 1902 and, when her family moved to Mississippi in 1904, developed a regular habit of running off to Memphis to soak up the Beale Street flavor. At her peak, Minnie played as well as or better than any man, once besting Big Bill Broonzy in a contest. She played in parks and streets, as well as vaudeville houses, and saw plenty; her songs were full of streetwalkers, dope fiends and doomed consumptives. Minnie's "Outdoor Blues" is a

window-rattling evocation of homelessness during the Depression. But her bedrock oeuvre consists of 12-bar tone poems sharply observing domestic life, from making biscuits to making love.

White hillbilly girls knew the blues, too. Theirs were the hardscrabble trials of sharecroppers' wives and coal miners' daughters. But nearly four decades before Loretta Lynn warned, "Don't come home a drinkin' with lovin' on your mind," few of them dared to voice their troubles aloud. Early country artists confined themselves to the rather polite conventions of traditional forms -- the reels, jigs and laments of their Scottish and Irish antecedents.

The Carter Family -- A.P. Carter, his wife, Sara, and their sister-in-law Maybelle -- began their remarkable career with "old timey" tunes. They had an early hit with the plucky optimism of "Keep on the Sunny Side" in 1928. But more surprising was the success, that same year, of their remake of a traditional song, "Single Girl, Married Girl." The lyrics limned the great divide in women's fates:

Single girl, single girl, she goes to the store and buys
Married girl, married girl, she rocks the cradle and cries

Once the original trio disbanded, it was "Mother" Maybelle who kept the Carter name in country, enlisting her daughters (including June, who later married Johnny Cash). Generations of spandexed axmen (and women) owe much of the reverence now accorded to lead guitar to Maybelle's innovative playing. Modestly, she held her own amid guitar greats. Says Cash, "Maybelle was friendly with and admired Chet Atkins, Merle Travis and Django Reinhardt. Her simple Appalachian style, which she called Carter Scratch, is not easily imitated."

Nor was it easily learned. Mother Maybelle's "simple" technique combined melody and rhythm strumming on the same instrument, and it helped move the guitar from the background to the forefront. Accomplished musician, savvy manager and gentle confessor to the road-wrecked likes of Hank Williams, Mother Maybelle did her best to live up to the name.

If the Carters virtually started the country-music industry, it was Kitty Wells, the young wife of another hillbilly singer, who finally, emphatically, trashed Nashville's conviction that girl singers couldn't sell records. Wells' 1952 "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels" laid into the devilment of two-timing married men with a double shot of hurt and sass. It flew to No. 1 on the country charts. As country's first bona fide female star, Wells blazed a rhinestone path for a host of Loretas, Tammys, Dollys and Rebas.

Rock's other great root is, of course, gospel. Listen to any group sound, from the Beatles' "It Won't Be Long" to TLC's "Waterfalls," and you can hear teched-up reverberations of the classic call-and-response format that rang between gospel choir and soloist, quartet leads and background singers. Gospel -- spreading the good news -- is by its nature a group sound. Where blues found its art in perfectly realized solitude, gospel's amazing grace flows from the succor of community.

Sometimes it's a mighty roar. The first "girl group" that left me truly thunderstruck was not all

got up in moist puce lipstick and snug mohair. And they were surely not spreading the 411 on m-e-n.

When I saw the Clara Ward Singers on some folkie TV show in the '60s, they were singing about Jesus -- Jaaaaay-eeeeeee-zus! And they flew. I watched in envious thrall as these ample women with thick ankles seemed to shoot straight up, weightless in their transport, their glossy, sky-high wigs shaking like lopsided pyramids of plum jello. They whanged tambourines on pillowy hips, straining seams and sound equipment with the strength of their convictions. These were women who had to sing. And they moved people; I have never seen anyone -- believer, agnostic, Asian or high WASP -- fail to at least twitch when I've filled a room with the ladies' live, funky organ testament, "Something Got a Hold of Me."

Years after that first snowy TV vision, I would learn that it was Ward, guardian angel to then-motherless child Aretha Franklin in Detroit, who hipped the Queen of Soul to her magnificent destiny. It was Ward who demonstrated firsthand the glories of vocal transport. Aretha described it to me as a true gospel moment: She was still a girl the day she attended a funeral at which Clara Ward got happy mid-song, crouched like a discus thrower and hurled her hat toward the coffin. "That did it," Aretha said.

From birth, Aretha had been steeped in gospel; her father was the Rev. C.L. Franklin, known as the Man With the Million Dollar Voice. Chess Records sold freight cars full of his shake-down-the-thunder sermons. The Rev. James Cleveland, another gospel luminary, lived with the family for a time and taught the three girls some bedrock piano. "But the ladies," Aretha told me, "how I loved my gospel ladies." They included Ward, her singers Marion Williams and Frances Steadman, and the great Mahalia Jackson.

Later, Aretha would realize that even before she understood her gift, the big, generous women who used to come to her father's house, stir up a pot of greens, sing and tell her "things girls should know" had sussed that this shy child was the one. That in fact she'd had little choice in the matter. "Clara knew," Aretha said. "She knew I had to sing."

Aretha sang at the funerals of both Ward and Jackson, sending those great ladies home after hugely successful careers. If blues ruled the '20s and '30s, the gospel boom gathered hurricane strength over the turmoil of the '40s. Majestic soloists like Marion Williams, Sallie Martin and Willie Mae Ford Smith had large followings, but no one did more to spread the good news than the queen, Mahalia Jackson.

Her voice could derail a freight train. And when Mahalia got happy, she would lift her skirt and run down a church aisle. To a war-wearied nation, to a long-suffering black populace, Mahalia was an ebony casting of Miss Liberty; her torch shone straight into heaven's gate. In 1946, her "Move On Up a Little Higher" sold 2 million copies. Her word was revered, her wit was wicked, and her combination of talent and personality opened the door to showbiz gospel -- the kind that landed Jackson on The Tonight Show, battling wits with Colonel Sanders, and that bounced the Clara Ward singers from A.M.E. choir lofts to praising his name on the Vegas Strip.

As early as 1938, Sister Rosetta Tharpe saw no problem with "singing both sides," taking her

big, bold voice and blues-tinged guitar out of church and into the Cotton Club. Tharpe could segue from "Jesus Is Here Today" to "I Want a Tall, Skinny Papa" without changing her fretwork. Before anyone had heard of Ray Charles or James Brown, Tharpe cut a version of "Jonah" that jumps like a net full of minnows. Her album *Gospel Train*, culled from recordings made in the '40s, is a marvelous stew of gospel, jazz and blues.

Musical innovation throughout the jazz age and swing era was largely the province of men: Armstrongs and Basies, Ellingtons and Hamptons. But fronting all those classy combos and bands were female vocalists who could play firey intellectual chess with the greatest instrumentalists. Generations of women rockers would take their cues -- visual and musical -- from a brace of sophisticated ladies who set the standard for ballads, upscale blues and jazz.

Billie Holiday -- the legendary Lady Day -- was singing in speak-easies and turning tricks as a teenager to overcome the crushing poverty of her birth to a pair of unwed teens in 1915. She cleaned at a brothel so she could play Bessie Smith records on the bawdy house Victrola. Hard times, heroin and a string of abusive men tempered Holiday's instrument to almost unbearable sensitivity. She had a flexibility, a hoodoo exactness of expression that moved millions. In 1939, her 200-proof artistry and audacity caused a sensation when she began singing "Strange Fruit," an anti-lynching song (from a Lewis Allen poem) that could not have been more graphic in painting the landscape of Southern racism.

Southern trees bear a strange fruit/
Blood on the leaves and blood on the root

Despite the furor, Holiday remained a huge star. She was one of the highest-paid entertainers in America in the mid-'40s, a favorite of black connoisseurs and the white lefty intelligentsia. Lady Day headed for Hollywood, where she got to play . . . a maid. Entrenched racism, a longtime drug habit and relentless hounding by narcotics agents resulted in a dimming of her spirit: Heart and liver failure killed her in 1959. She was not spared the final indignity of being fingerprinted in her hospital bed.

That same year, another black club singer -- an orphan who had also come up hard -- was hitting her stride as the hardest-swinging jazz singer this musically misbegotten nation has ever produced. In the mid-'50s, Ella Fitzgerald tore through Cole Porter, Gershwin, and Rodgers and Hart standards, rearranged their very molecules with her nuclear scat, and joyfully, spookily put them back together with an air-traffic controller's precision and sang-froid. You can never tell where Miss Ella is going until she makes a perfect one-point landing on a note that hollers, "Yes! Of course!" Illness, age and the amputation of both legs halted her performing days, but as recently as 1988, she recorded for Quincy Jones' *Back on the Block* album in the humble company of Big Daddy Kane and Kool Moe Dee. She died in 1996 at the age of 78.

If there is a paramount body of evidence to support the feminist poster slogan "Sisterhood is powerful," it is Dinah Washington's 1958 LP tribute to the Empress, *The Bessie Smith Songbook*. Having come up through gospel, jazz and R&B, Washington was hardly a blues singer. But on that album, her interpretation of Smith standards -- from the sublimely urbane "After You've Gone" to the gin-soaked "Jailhouse Blues" -- reveals a keen harmony of spirit. It's

a communication across time and death that outpaces even the digitally engineered duet between Natalie Cole and her late father that made a hit of "Unforgettable" in 1991.

Washington could sing anything; her biggest hits were R&B songs cut on Mercury, mainly in the '50s. She was also one of the first big female stars to effectively mind her own business. She opened a Detroit restaurant and persuaded the likes of Aretha Franklin, Muhammad Ali and Sammy Davis Jr. to sign with her booking agency, Queen Attractions. Washington was also queen of the Flame Show Bar and the Twenty Grand club, in Detroit, where hopefuls like Marvin Gaye, Diana Ross and Aretha Franklin clamored to see her. The next local black enterprise, Motown Records, was just gathering speed when Washington died in 1963 at 39. A lifelong voluptuary, she had downed a heedless mix of liquor and pills. It's still unknown whether Washington enjoyed seven or nine husbands during her short time on earth. But her live-fully-and-fiercely philosophy is another little-discussed legacy of women in rock.

Early on, there was a wellspring of womanly hedonism that relieved the tedium of the road -- and enlivened the music. These were women of appetites. They were feeling, thinking sorts for whom sex, food and drink -- not to mention personal adornment -- were aspects of life to be wholeheartedly enjoyed. Things being what they are in the '90s, Madonna chose to explore her sexuality with a coolly conceived, limited-edition book (*Sex*), pricey bondage props and the co-conspiracy of a top fashion photographer. But when women were first tasting the freedoms of the road and the royalty check, things were a bit more ad hoc.

This is not to say that meticulous planning didn't go into the stadium wedding thrown by Sister Rosetta Tharpe to solemnize her third marriage, in 1951. Twenty thousand "guests," most of them women, bought tickets and oohed and aahed over the \$5,000 fireworks display. In addition to serial matrimony, Dinah Washington indulged in peroxided wigs, crystal chandeliers and mink toilet-seat covers. Bessie Smith ran through hot young men and cute chorus girls like so many chocolate truffles; so did Ma Rainey. Bisexuality was no big deal -- witness the saucy lyrics of Bessie Smith's "Jailhouse Blues":

Thirty days, with my back turned to the wall . . .
Look here, Mr. Jailkeeper, put another gal in my stall . . .

By the mid-'50s, wild, wild young men were garnering most of the headlines with a new music first called rhythm & blues and then, once the white boys took hold of it, rock & roll. Black women like Etta James and LaVern Baker, schooled in gospel and the blues, were turning out ripping R&B sides. Ruth Brown's fusillade of hits, from "5-10-15 Hours" to "Wild, Wild Young Men," made the nascent Atlantic Records "the house that Ruth built." But in the '50s, vocal expression by women was about as segregated as the nation was during those Eisenhower years. Ruth Brown never made it past the 20s on the white-dominated pop charts; Etta James' classic "Tell Mama" got to No. 23. White female cover records fared better. Peggy Lee's cover of Little Willie John's "Fever" shot to the Top 10; Connie Francis hiccuped cutely through "Stupid Cupid"; and sweet Rosemary Clooney bounced through "Mangos."

Postwar America was deeply conservative but giddily optimistic. It was a schizophrenic decade that embraced tight girdles and loosey-goosey hula hoops, Billy Graham's stern homilies and

Detroit's finned and portholed excesses. But the greatest divide would prove generational. The rise of rock & roll had begun to strain the straight seams of domestic affairs, art and fashion. A decade that began with Dior's corseted, WASP-waisted New Look would end with an industry frantically turning out bluejeans and mohair sheaths. For the first time in history, girls wouldn't have to dress in "junior" versions of Mom's prim shirtwaists. Department-store buyers, parents and teachers were all shook up.

Despite these revolutions, feminism was still two decades and a million tuna casseroles away. And the brief flaring of two talents in the mid-'50s is testament to the sheer impossibility, back then, of having it all. Patsy Cline, best known these days through the gorgeous tributes of k.d. lang and a baby-boomer rediscovery of her boxed sets, was a country singer so vibrant, so nuanced, that even the pop charts couldn't resist her. Cline -- born Virginia Patterson Hensley, a sweet-faced Virginia girl -- could get down and yodel up a barn raiser, but her specialty was slow, excruciating heartache.

Her ballads ("Crazy," "I Fall to Pieces") killed. And getting them out there took everything that Cline had. Married twice, with two children, she found herself so torn between domestic and career issues that she recorded with broken ribs after a serious car crash; she cooked madly when she came off the road. Somehow she also found the time and inclination to mother-hen another new singer with a hard life and a sweet disposition -- Loretta Lynn. Anxious to get home on a foggy winter's night in 1963, Patsy Cline died in a plane crash at 30.

Elvis is in his mama's living room in Memphis, earnestly facing a pretty woman with raven curls and blood-red lipstick. It's 1956, and the hopeful, soon-to-be King is playing a stack of blues records for Wanda Jackson, a firecracker vocalist out of Oklahoma City who was holding her own at 18, recording in front of the big country guitars of Roy Clark, Buck Owens and Merle Travis. Wanda and Elvis have been touring down South.

"You should be doin' this kind of music," he tells her, and though she likes the hard stuff, she demurs.

"I'm just a country singer."

Elvis persists: "I am, too, basically. But you can do this."

Jackson did. But do you know her? Until I stumbled on her Capitol Vintage Collection, I was unaware they were doing nuclear testing in '50s recording studios. Jackson's reading of the Leiber and Stoller chestnut "Riot in Cell Block #9" shoots blue flames off the word raaaaaht. She growls and hollers through a series of hard rockers. When Jackson whoops, it's the vocal equivalent of Jerry Lee Lewis mule-kicking his piano stool. Buck Owens' guitar races to keep up with her on the gleefully sassy "Hot Dog! That Made Him Mad."

She was hot, she was great, but in the '50s, Wanda Jackson just didn't fit anywhere. She insisted on touring with black piano player Big Al Downing in the segregated South. The night she played the Grand Ole Opry in a little sheath she'd designed with rhinestone spaghetti straps, an outraged Ernest Tubb made her throw a jacket over them nekkid shoulders. She submitted but

stormed off afterward and never played there again.

Jackson never found her Colonel Parker, never had a hit bigger than 1960's "Let's Have a Party," a two-minute frenzy so real you can feel the spilled beer seep into your shoes. She tried Vegas and more country, found Jesus and then gospel. At last report, Jackson, a grandmother, was still shaking several layers of naughty cowgirl fringe with the occasional gig near her home, in Los Angeles. Like Patsy Cline, she rocked too hard and early, and had to give it up too soon.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Maybelle Carter

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Big Mama Thornton 1969: She hit with "Hound Dog" before Elvis cut it.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Holiday's voice was tempered by hard times, heroin and racism. In 1949 she was booked for opium possession in San Francisco.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Mahalia Jackson 1968: She was and is the undisputed queen of gospel.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Ella Fitzgerald at the Downbeat Club, in New York, 1959. At that time, Fitzgerald was just hitting her stride as the hardest-swinging jazz singer this nation has ever produced.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Dinah Washington 1950: She could sing any song and make it her own.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): LaVern Baker, Chicago 1960: She recorded her paean to mythic hero Jim Dandy in 1956. Like most pioneer rhythm & blues singers, Baker was schooled in gospel and the blues.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Patsy Cline 1961: Though she died at 30, she found time to mentor Loretta Lynn.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Wanda Jackson circa 1961: Elvis told her to can the country and rock out.

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Source: Rolling Stone, 11/13/97 Issue 773, p44, 5p

Item: 9711053726