

Sippie Wallace - Beulah Belle Thomas was born in Plum Bayou, Arkansas (50 miles South of Little Rock) on November 1, 1898. She was one of thirteen children born to Fanny and George W. Thomas Sr. When she was just a child her family moved to Houston, Texas where her father was a deacon at the Shiloh Baptist Church. In grammar school, Beulah was nicknamed 'Sippie' because as she once said, her teeth "were so far apart she had to sip everything," and the name stuck with her.



As a member of a family overflowing with musical talents, it was at Shiloh that Beulah began to develop her musical abilities, learning to sing and play the organ as a member of the church choir. On summer nights, she and her brothers George Jr. and Hersal, both talented musicians, would sneak out of their house and follow the ragtime at the local travelling tent shows. There they listened to Blues singers and became acquainted with its style and sound. On one such visit to the tent show, Sippie was asked to fill an opening in the chorus line. That very night, a star was born.

Around that same time, the tent shows began to expand, with performances growing more and more elaborate, which provided the perfect opportunity to gain more experience as a performer. When the tent shows moved from Houston to Dallas, Sippie went with them. So by the mid-1910s, she had become a versatile tent-show performer, acting in plays, dancing in the chorus line, doing comedy routines, singing solo blues ballads, and even serving as a snake charmer's assistant.

Pursuing greater musical opportunities, she and Hersal moved to New Orleans in 1915 to work with George Jr., who was by then an accomplished pianist, songwriter, and music publisher. Sippie found herself surrounded by other musicians like King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, Clarence Williams, and Johnny Dodds, who just like her, were on their way to becoming jazz greats. In New Orleans, after marrying and divorcing Frank Seals, she married Matt Wallace in 1917 and took his last name.

In 1923, Sippie and Hersal moved to Chicago, where George Jr. helped them meet Ralph Peer, the general manager of Okeh Records. Three months after signing with Okeh Records, billed as the '*Texas Nightingale*', Sippie became a blues star. *Shorty George Blues*, written with her brother George Jr. sold more than 100,000 records. From 1924 to 1927, she recorded more than forty songs with Okeh Records, many with her friends from New Orleans like Louis Armstrong, Johnny Dodd, and Clarence Williams. Many of her popular songs like *Lazy Bone Blues* were written and composed by Sippie and her brothers George Jr. and Hersal.

Sippie's hard-fought success was dealt many personal and professional blues during this period, though. Herschel died from food poisoning in 1926. The Great Depression ushered in a change in the public's musical taste, and decreasing interest in classic blues and Sippie's career. Finally, in 1936 George Jr. and Matt Wallace both died. This spate of tragedies prompted Sippie to move to Detroit and embrace her gospel music roots.



In 1966, fellow jazz star Victoria Spivey convinced Sippie to make a record with her. After almost four decades away from the limelight, at 68 years old, Sippie Wallace made her great comeback to the jazz scene. Sippie and Victoria released their album *Sippie Wallace and Victoria*

Spivey on Victoria's record label in 1970. In 1971, Bonnie Raitt's self-titled debut album included two of Sippie's most famous songs, *Woman Be Wise* and *Mighty Tight Woman*, renewing public interest in Sippie and her music. During the 1970s and 1980s, the two women recorded and toured together. In 1982, she recorded the album *Sippie* with Atlantic Records. It was nominated for a Grammy Award in 1983 and won the 1982 W. C. Handy Award for Best Blues Album of the Year.

After suffering a severe stroke, Sippie died in Detroit on November 1, 1986. Since her death, she has been officially recognised across the country for the pioneering jazz singer and musician she was. She was posthumously inducted into the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame in 1993, the Blues Foundation Hall of Fame in 2003, and is a member of the Houston Institute for Culture's Texas Music Hall of Fame.

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