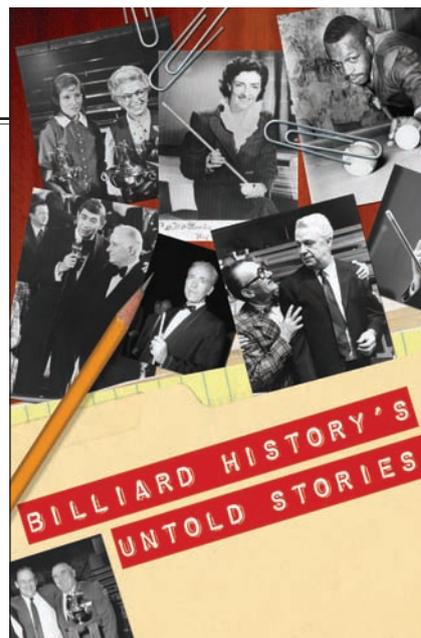


SEPARATED AT BIRTH: DID FATS HAVE KIDS?

Minnesota Fats told a lot of stories, but not about offspring. But there's evidence that he sired at least a couple of daughters.



BY **R.A. DYER**

Minnesota Fats said he went down with the ship. It was a great glorious ocean liner, just like the Titanic, and there was the Fatman clomping about the wooden deck and playing the accordion. A pair of dice rattled in his pocket.

And Minnesota Fats said he carried around \$10,000 in his pocket, always. “Ever seen something like that, Junior?” He’d pull out a wad with a smirk. Sometimes he’d smear it across the table like peanut butter.

And Minnesota Fats never, ever changed a flat tire. “Hell, I’d change cars.”

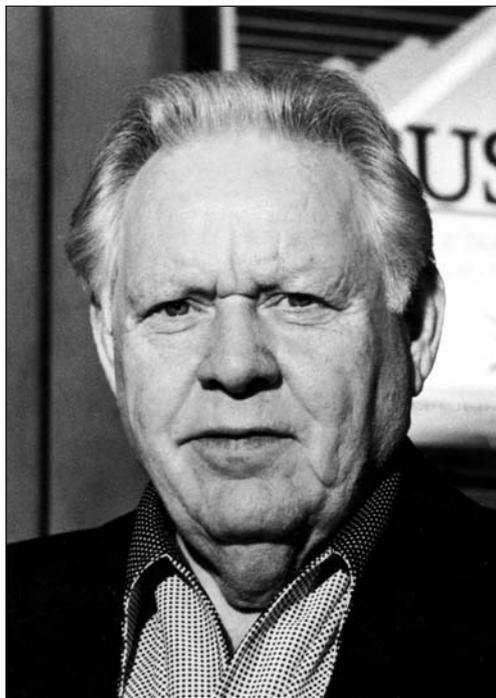
Minnesota Fats, down in DuQuoin, Ill., talking horseshit to the children there, and to the grownup men too, was like Elvis Presley and Santa Claus. He was fat and he was invincible. Nobody gambled like Minnesota Fats. Nobody hustled like Minnesota Fats. When he snored you could measure it on the Richter Scale. “He told so many wild stories but there was a grain of truth in everything he said,” said Brad Holford, who at 15, in 1978, was a Bona Fide Friend of Fats. “It was exaggerated, sure, but when he talked about going down on the ship, or this or that — it was true. He did go down on a ship liner. He was an accordion player. That was how he was on a ship liner, and he was gam-

bling in his off time. But I don’t know the name of the boat. I don’t know the conditions of its sinking. But there was some truth in all of it.”

Welcome back to *Untold Stories*. For this month’s installment I’ve interviewed Holford and spoke with Karen Fox, the widow of Tom Fox, who co-wrote the newly re-released memoirs of Minnesota Fats, “The Bankshot and

I conducted in southern Illinois during the 1990s. The point of it is this: While we can find hints of Fats’ true nature in his wild boasts, we can also find hints of it in what Fats left unsaid, and what others said about him.

Specifically, I want to zero in on the question of children. Fats in his memoirs (or anywhere else for that matter) never mentioned any. He claimed plen-



It’s in the genes: James, right, claimed that Fats was her father. The resemblance is striking.

Other Great Robberies.” I’ve also looked at Etta James biography, and spoken to Fats’ second wife, Theresa Bell. I touched base with JoAnn McNeal, the daughter of legendary tournament promoter George Jansco. I’ve also reviewed some old interviews

ty of sexual conquests, sure. He said he loved chasing them “tomatoes.” But he never, ever, talked publicly about siring kids. His long marriage with Evelyn Wanderone, his first wife, never produced children. But in this month’s column, I’ll present evidence that Fats

Untold Stories: Minnesota Fats

Etta James wrote in her autobiography that she was told the identity of her hustler-father by several of her mother's closest friends.

sired not of just one daughter, but two.

Now I want to stress right here, before I write another word, that these stories have not been confirmed in any real sense. Theresa Bell, his second wife, disputes them outright. She said Fats personally denied to her one of the claims, and that Evelyn Wanderone, his first wife, told her that Fats was infertile. "It's really strange everyone coming out of the woodwork [with these claims]," said Bell, contacted last month by telephone.

Now, having given that disclaimer, I will also say this: The stories aren't new, and those in any position to prove them or put them to rest are long dead. Whether or not Fats was firing blanks during his marriage in no way speaks to the possibility of children before his marriage, which is when the births would have taken place. Several old-

timers in DuQuoin and Dowell also have whispered one of the stories to me, over beers, during my long-ago travels in southern Illinois while I was writing "Hustler Days." While those barroom stories might rightly be rejected as hearsay, I have no reason to discount the first-hand accounts presented in this column. The people who presented them did not do so for any obvious financial gain or for personal fame.

The first story is a fairly well known one to rhythm and blues fans and to those few tired souls who, like me, have made a study of Fats life and who probably need to get out more. Here it is: While traveling in California during the late 1930s, Fats apparently seduced and left pregnant a teenage girl by the name of Dorothy Hawkins.

He was then about 25. Wanderone was spending his nights in Los Angeles' Central Avenue dance halls, also frequented by the fast-living Dorothy. She gave birth to a girl and named her Jamesetta. Jamesetta grew up to become the famous music diva Etta James.

In her autobiography, "Rage to Survive," James said she was told of

the identity of her hustler-father by several of her mother's close friends, including Willie Best, the famous actor known during the 1930s for playing shuffling porters in Marx Brothers and Shirley Temple films.

Best was almost precisely Fats age, and the two, for a while, remained inseparable. "Willie and Fats were thick as thieves [and] Fats had a taste for colored girls," James wrote in her memoirs. "'Girl,' Willie said to me one time, 'you look just like your papa.

You're the spitting image of Minnesota Fats.'" James also said that her mother also talked about Fats.

Both Wanderone (as Minnesota Fats) and Jamesetta (as Etta James) would become world-class entertainers.

In photographs, both look startlingly alike, with their

wide faces, tiny tulip mouths, and small but piercing eyes. James' oldest son, Donto, also bears an eerie resemblance. Etta said she went on a pilgrimage to visit Fats during the end of his life, when he was living at the Hermitage Hotel in Nashville, Tenn. Bell also confirms that trip — but said that Fats then denied the connection. "He said, 'I am not her father; I have never with been your mother' — although that wasn't the term he used. He was a little more colorful," she said.

The story of Fats' second daughter comes to us from DuQuoin resident Brad Holford, who as a teenager during the late 1970s followed Fats around like a puppy. He carried his stuff. He drove with him back and forth from poolhalls and restaurants. He helped with errands. When the sandy-haired Brad got his driver's license, he worked as Fats' unpaid chauffeur. "He was not an ordinary person," said Holford fondly.

Brad's parents owned the Kentucky Fried Chicken in DuQuoin (Fats' favorite restaurant), and the old pool hustler came in every day to eat a chicken, sometimes two. In 1978, when Fats was about 65 and Holford 15, the hustler agreed to play Willie Mosconi in a famous challenge match in New



COURTESY BRAD HOLFORD

The woman at the head of the table claimed to be the hustler's daughter, according to Holford (at far right).

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York City. Brad said Fats invited his family to fly up.

“To me it was a huge trip,” said Holford, then a DuQuoin High School freshman. He said that promoter Charles Ursitti met his family there. “That was the first big trip I went with [Fats], and I got to meet Howard Cossell. We met him a day late because we got snowed in at St. Louis, and we came down to the Waldorf Astoria, and there he was, down in the lobby. We came in right in the main big lobby, and there was a bunch of tables off to one side, and Howard Cossell was down there. We were there [talking to him] about 10 minutes. Fats introduced us.

“I didn’t know who Willie Mosconi was, except for Fats talking about him. But Mosconi himself came over and he introduced himself. The Mosconis — they were super-nice. And Willie came up to me specifically. I didn’t ask for his autograph, and maybe he did it to irritate Fats — but he came up to me specifically and he gave me an autograph. Like I said, Mosconi hated Fats.”



Fats rarely spoke of offspring, but he did meet with a woman who considered him her father when in New York for a challenge match with Mosconi (left).

It was during this trip that Holford got wind, first-hand, that Wanderone might have had a daughter. He did not then know about the Etta James story but either way, this woman was not Etta James. Holford remembers the woman said something about her own mother

being involved with the carnival. He said that she was then married to a New York banker. He said she called Wanderone “Daddy,” and that Wanderone, while away from southern Illinois, then and there acknowledged the relationship.

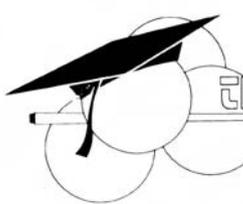
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Untold Stories: Minnesota Fats

Fats was America's most famous pool hustler, not its most famous saint. He came to symbolize the carefree and irresponsible.

Holford said this mystery woman was as nice as can be.

"She showed up at the Waldorf when we showed up," he said. "It was the first day we were there. We never heard word one about Fats having any children, but this woman came walking up, with her arms stretched out, saying 'Daddy!' She started hugging him. That was the first we heard of Fats having a daughter. The next day she spent the whole day with us. She took me and my mom — all of us — out to the Statue of Liberty. She spent the whole day with us and took us to Chinatown and she took us to Little Italy."

Holford described the woman as having reddish graying hair, and at the time



Retiring in DuQuoin, Fats showed a paternal side with local kids, but acknowledged none of his own.

approaching middle age. He even has a picture he took with her. They're all sitting together — Holford's mom, dad, the woman and the woman's husband — smiling for the birdie at a New York City restaurant. The tables are pulled together. The woman is wearing fur. But for the life of Holford, he cannot remember her name. I've included the

photo in this month's column. Are you this woman? Do you know her? Can anyone dispel this story or confirm it? I'm all ears.

Theresa Bell told me she had never heard this second story. Holford said he never forgot it. "She looked just like Fats," he said. Sometimes he takes out that old photo, all five of them lined up, and turns it over in his fingers. They're all smiling and happy: his mom, his dad, that mysterious woman and her husband, and Minnesota Fats — the most famous pool hustler in the world. Memories are magic sometimes.

Again, I will say this about these stories. I can find no concealed motive in their telling. Etta James certainly does not need to prove a relationship with Fats to secure her own fame. But she undoubtedly would like to know about her own father. As for Holford — he did not contact me with this information, but rather I heard the stories around Little Egypt and so I tracked him down. It's been something that's been spoken about there for years, at least in certain quarters.

Charles Ursitti, the promoter, also recalls meeting a woman on a couple occasions whom Fats identified as his daughter. I could not contact James to ask her more about her tale. But as for Holford — as for me — the possibility that Fats may have sired children early in life does not diminish his legacy. He was America's most famous pool hustler, not its most famous saint. He came to symbolize the carefree and the irresponsible, not the staid lives that most of us live. And as always with Fats, all we have are the stories.

R.A. Dyer is the author of "Hustler Days: Minnesota Fats, Wimpy Lassiter, Jersey Red and America's Great Age of Pool." Look for his new book from Lyons Press due out in 2007. To report your own poolroom lore, go to the Untold Stories link at www.hustler-days.com.

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