



Rosetta Reitz: Rediscovering Women in Jazz & Blues

The following article is based on the author's presentation at ARSC's 2005 Conference in Austin, TX, April 2005.

Where were all the women in jazz and blues? Rosetta Reitz has been answering this question for nearly thirty years, and although her Rosetta Records is no longer in business, at the age of 80 she still fields inquiries – from scholars, journalists, historians and music critics from all over the world. Reitz, who grew up in a Jewish family in Utica, New York, is recognized as one of the leading experts on female blues and jazz artists who performed in the early 1920s through to 1960.

Growing up, Reitz did not play an instrument, but she did listen and dance to the *Hit Parade* on Saturday night radio, and that was how her love of music began. Although music was such an important part of her life, as a young woman in the 1940s, Reitz did not feel the freedom to choose music at the store and buy it for herself. She explained: "For some reason, the men owned the music."¹ Boyfriends would introduce her to new music and they would say: "Oh, you gotta hear this." At the time it never occurred to Reitz that she could buy any 78 she wanted. Coincidentally, she dated men who shared her interest in jazz, and years later she would recall how unbelievable it was for a woman not to feel as though she could buy a record from a store.

In the early 1940s, Reitz was paying her own way through university, majoring in sociology at Wisconsin. Upon leaving, a year shy of graduation, she went to where she had always known she should be, Greenwich Village. In New York, Reitz had various careers. Along with music, books held great interest for her. When she first arrived in the city in 1946, she spent time at The Gotham Book Mart on 47th Street. Frances Steloff, the owner, hired her, but after about a year and a half, Reitz decided to open up her own bookstore, The Four Seasons Book Shop on Greenwich Avenue in the Village. More than a year had past and the bookstore reached a level of success that made it difficult for one person to manage, so Reitz decided to sell. She returned to The Gotham Book Mart at Steloff's request and worked there for another year.

Between owning the bookstore in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and establishing Rosetta Records in the late 1970s, Reitz started a greeting card business, attended the New York Institute of Finance to become a stockbroker, was manager of the Classifieds Department at the *Village Voice*, and became a writer. According to a 1980 article in *The New York Times*, Reitz was among the first to cover the loft jazz scene for *The Village*

Voice in the early 1970s. She also wrote a mushroom cookbook (1965), and a book on menopause (1977).

Reitz would continue to listen to music and began researching female jazz and blues musicians. As a mother working all day, coming home to three children, who needed dinner and help with their homework, Reitz would sit back and lose herself in music. She would focus on what the women had to say and these women were a great comfort. When her friends would visit she would share the music with them, and usually they would go home with a tape of what they had heard. This was the beginning of Rosetta Records. Her friends loved the music and Reitz figured other women might also be interested. According to noted music historian Judith Tick:

*In the 1970s the revival of feminism produced an explosion of activity in revisionist history and a new discipline initially named women's studies.*³

In her own words, Reitz personalized the spirit of the times:

*...in the early 70s at the beginning of the women's movement, that's the crucial point. ...women were looking for women in all the disciplines. Where were the women? Were there women? Since I'd been a jazz buff all my life, why is jazz a male domain? It was my question. Where were the women? Weren't women interested? Or weren't they involved? So I started hunting about and looking for the women...But were they only vocalists? Who were they? What were they singing about? ...Turns out they were there all the time. They just weren't given attention or considered important.*⁴

Rosetta Records was not the only music company from the 70s and 80s that grew out of the women's movement; Leonarda, Ladyslipper and Olivia Records were started by women that focused on women in music. These companies are a reflection of the times.

Using proceeds from her writings and borrowing \$10,000 from a few female friends, Reitz started to put the business together in the late 1970s. Reitz had been researching the artists, their culture and their music all along. It was just the business part of the equation that she now spent some time developing, looking into manufacturing, distribution, negotiating rights, mastering, production and general business strategies.

One of six siblings who worked in the family bakery as a child, Reitz remembers at the age of eight learning general business practices that would help her throughout her life. The day the rye bread was freshly baked it was wrapped in white paper and tied with a string. A second day rye bread was wrapped in one sheet of newspaper folded over to cover the loaf. This very basic concept was something that Reitz felt separated her from other entrepreneurs. She had a good business sense that was ingrained in her as a child in the family's bakery ...nothing fancy, just plain business.

Starting Rosetta Records was the beginning of a new career. Reitz turned her passion into her life's work and the company's logo was a clear sign that a woman was in charge: Reitz took Pan, the Greek god of music, and changed the head to a woman playing a horn. Along with releasing music that had not been widely heard for decades, she also set out to expand people's knowledge of the women and their music. Reitz did her best to

meticulously research each of their stories to correctly document their lives and she was able to include many photographs. The liner notes were extensive. Even now, as she writes a book about these women, she corrects information in her earlier liner notes. Of course, she did not use incorrect information on purpose, but sometimes a source might not have been as reliable as one might have thought.

In 1980 Rosetta Records released its first album, *Mean Mothers: Independent Women's Blues, Volume 1*. The catalog read: "...the first in the Women's Heritage Series presents a new view of the blues singers: Fresh, Feisty & Formidable, NOT victims".⁵ It presented a new view of women blues singers as independent, spirited and strong, not as victims as was the general thought. In a *New York Times* article (1984), the Pulitzer Prize winning author Alice Walker wrote: "When I started working on *The Color Purple* I was listening to a lot of Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, the women on the Mean Mothers' album."⁶ Walker loved how the women dealt with sexuality. "They showed you had a whole self and you were not to succumb to being somebody else's – as they would say – 'play toy'."⁷

Rosetta Records' second release was *Women's Railroad Blues*. This is a solid example of how Reitz revisits history and the featured singers demonstrated a perspective of the railroad that had long been ignored. In the 1920s, men rode the trains north for better jobs, but the lyrics on this album communicate a different view of history. The original notion was that trains took the men north to freedom and an opportunity for financial prosperity. In fact, the trains robbed the women of their men. According to the notes in the Rosetta Records' catalog, "This women's history appears for the first time in these liner notes".⁸

Reitz rescued important historical recordings of female vocalist, and trumpeter Valaida Snow. They are brought together on an album entitled *Hot Snow*. Had she not retrieved these recordings they might have been lost forever. Snow was a skilled musician, dancer, composer, conductor, producer and singer, and the liner notes explain in great detail the life history of this musician. Another important collection of music that Reitz released on her label was *Jailhouse Blues*, a cappella songs from the Mississippi Parchman Penitentiary. The Mississippi Arts Commission awarded Reitz a contract to produce the album. According to the Rosetta Records' catalog:

*This is the first time women's prison songs have been put on record in a collection. The record was produced under the auspices of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History and has been placed on the selected list by the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. It is a source record, illuminating many origins of American music.*⁹

The songs were recorded over a three-year period, beginning in 1936, by Herbert Halpert and John Lomax, fieldworkers from the Library of Congress.

Reitz was also instrumental in bringing The International Sweethearts of Rhythm back from obscurity and to an audience outside of jazz circles. Nat Hentoff, a writer for *The Wall Street Journal*, praised the group and Reitz's efforts to preserve its history.¹⁰ Part of the Sweethearts of Rhythm album was taken from a 1945 Armed Forces Radio service broadcast. Reitz also co-produced with her daughter, Rebecca, a documentary on the Sweethearts of Rhythm that included interviews with six of the original members of the group.

Reitz was a collector of archival film footage. In addition to the *Sweethearts of Rhythm* documentary, she produced *Shouters and Wailers*. This collection of rare footage is a tribute to women's blues singers such as Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Ida Cox, Ethel Waters and Josephine Baker, among others. The other video that Reitz assembled was *Jazz Women 1932-1952 Foremothers, Volume 1*, which includes performances by Sister Rosetta Thorpe, Helen Humes, Ida Cox, Maxine Sullivan and Nina Mae McKinney.

It often took Reitz two to four years to put a record together. It was very difficult to locate enough material to complete an LP and there were often technical problems with the recordings themselves. Reitz particularly enjoyed spending time with the recordings and cleaning them up to create a final master. Rosetta Records was a one-woman show and Reitz did everything herself to make sure they were done correctly. She researched the artists, wrote the liner notes, negotiated the rights, paid the royalties, designed the packaging, mastered the records, created the concepts, and arranged for sales and distribution. The company worked with a manufacturer in Hauppauge, Long Island. Rounder Records in Cambridge, Massachusetts and City Hall in San Rafael, California were east and west coast distributors, and she also had a distributor in Birmingham, England.

In addition to being a record label owner and music historian, Reitz was also a concert producer and lecturer. George Wein co-produced a concert with Reitz after she sent him a fourteen-page proposal. She brought the women and their music to Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center, in June 1980 as part of the Newport Jazz Festival. The concert was titled *Blues Is A Woman* and the performers that evening included Sippie Wallace, Willie Mae (Big Mama) Thornton, Adelaide Hall, Koko Taylor, Linda Hopkins, Beulah Bryant and Nell Carter. Carmen McRae read from a script written by Reitz.

In July 1981, Reitz teamed up with George Wein again to co-produce two concerts, also as part of the Newport Jazz Festival. The first, *Women Blow Their Own Horns*, included Melba Liston and Marion McPartland. The second, *Wild Women Don't Have the Blues*, featured Nell Carter, Linda Hopkins and Sippie Wallace. Reitz could now add co-producing concerts at Carnegie Hall and the Hollywood Bowl to her long list of accomplishments.

Reitz visited various institutions to present her films and to lecture. She called her program *Shouters & Wailers*, and these presentations helped fund the record label's activities. She appeared at the Berklee Performance Center in Boston, Massachusetts, Alice Tully Hall as part of the New York Film Festival, and the Westchester Conservatory of Music. Reitz recalls speaking at a number of universities including Harvard, Princeton, Cornell and Brown, and she lectured at numerous other institutions, including the Detroit Public Library, The International Festival of Women's Films in Toronto, Women's Jazz Festival in Kansas City, Landmark Theater in Syracuse, New York, international festivals, and the National Museum of American History Smithsonian Institution.

A day-long symposium at the Smithsonian Institution, *Women In Blues*, took place on 9 March 1985 as part of The National Museum of American History's Saturday Afternoon Series, and The Program in Black American Culture and Reitz presented *The Legacy of Black Women Blues Singers on Film*. Exhibiting her work at the Smithsonian was an important event for Reitz. She recalled: "I figured I have got to do something the minute I get up on that stage to reassure these women that I'm okay. That how dare I,

you know?"¹¹ Reitz was referring to the fact she had become an expert in a culture that was far from her own. It was very important to her to be accepted by the black women sitting in the room. Reitz describes her opening words and the audience's reaction:

*Many people have asked me how I became so interested in women singing the blues to make it my life's work. My three heroes in my life are Emily Dickinson, Bessie Smith and Eleanor Roosevelt. You could hear some sigh of relief or something, but what is she talking about? They never heard Bessie Smith linked up with Emily Dickinson or Eleanor Roosevelt before. So everyone looked up and took notice. Maybe this woman has something to say. The reason that they're my heroes is each one of these women in her own way used improvisation in her life and I admire improvisation very much. Oh well, you could hear people breathing easier.*¹²

Reitz worked hard to get Bessie Smith inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame and have her image on a United States postage stamp. Reitz badgered the hall of fame for four years and the postal service for ten. Bessie Smith was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1984, and in 1994 she was honored with her image on a postage stamp. Reitz was invited to speak at the festivities on the first day of sale in Smith's hometown of Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Reitz truly believed in the music. She often wondered what her life would have been like if she had heard these songs growing up. In conversation she recalled:

*I know when I grew up in upstate New York as a young girl if I had heard some of the songs played on the radio I would have had many different attitudes than I did have because I would have heard and learned that there were some women in this country who spoke honestly and they spoke in a way that was very different than what I considered the proper way to behave and speak.*¹³

Reitz was a feminist. The songs affirmed her thoughts and actions. Bessie Smith's lyrics: "Ain't gonna marry. Ain't gonna settle down. I'm a young girl and I ain't done runnin' 'round" was such a different train of thought from what Reitz was taught growing up. She found these songs liberating.

After eighteen years, Reitz decided to close the company. The recording business was changing and CDs were becoming a more common configuration and manufacturers were not as accommodating. Instead of being able to drop ship from the manufacturer, Reitz had to keep all the manufactured CDs in her Chelsea apartment or rent warehouse space. So, she rented warehouse space. Large orders would be drop shipped right from the factory, but smaller orders Reitz filled herself. Since a large part of her business was mail order, Reitz made many trips to the warehouse and then to the post office. This was a big hassle because Reitz did not own a car and could not carry everything alone. She had to wait for her daughter to help her. Reitz looked into office space and hiring a staff, but decided that she did not want to bother doing business at that level. Along with the issues surrounding CDs, Reitz said: "I had lived the experience through."¹⁴

Along the way, Reitz picked up a few awards and grants. She was the recipient of the 1985 Indie Award for her *Lil Green* release in the category of Historical Releases, presented by the National Association of Independent Record Dealers (NAIRD). She

received a Distinguished Service award in 1989 from the Harlem School of the Arts, and was honored as one of the first to receive a Wonder Woman Award, initiated by Warner Communications in 1981. It awarded \$7,500 to women over the age of 40 who showed a potential for significant work. Reitz also received a grant from Thanks To Be Grandmother Winifred Foundation, a financial award given to programs that have positive affects on the well being of women 54 or older.

Rosetta Reitz has been an important force in bringing to light the forgotten women of music. Without Reitz the early women of jazz and blues would possibly be lost. Many people write about these women, but very few hunt down their recordings, research the history, culture, and stories that complement the music, and release the music and the information to the public.

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