

WOMEN'S BLUES & JAZZ

Their Magic

1920 to 1950s

by

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INTRODUCTION

The only time I had butterflies inside me was the Saturday I walked into the Carmichael Auditorium to be a participant in an all-day colloquium “Women in Blues” at the Smithsonian Institution on March 9, 1985. I was the only white woman invited to participate.

I took a seat to listen to the others while waiting for Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, then the Director of the Program in Black American Culture and the producer of this special day, to call on me for my turn. After looking around again, the flutters became fiercer for I had never before faced or addressed such a resplendent audience.

The huge room was full of Big Mamas, handsomely dressed with their spiffy Spring hats as if they were sitting in church. How could I stand up and tell them about their legacy? Luckily I had some peppermint lifesavers. They did their job. I knew how I would begin.

This is how:

“Many people ask the question: How did you happen to make the blues singers your work? My answer: My three American heroes are Emily Dickinson, Bessie Smith and Eleanor Roosevelt. They all used improvisation in their lives and made a big difference. Emily Dickinson was the first woman to use improvisation in poetry; Bessie Smith used improvisation and changed the blues from a folk expression to an art form and Eleanor Roosevelt was the first First Lady to use improvisation to become an activist for equality in our democracy. Two of these women have been duly acknowledged as heroes but Bessie Smith has not.”

There was a strong interest in the atmosphere. This was news, no one had ever heard of Bessie Smith in such company. And like the traditional blues line, I knew, "Everything's gonna be alright." The butterflies disappeared and I continued with my presentation. I was showing some film clips from my archival collection, Bessie, Billie, Ethel, The International Sweethearts, etc. Once the projector started, I was comfortable talking about the women who would be on the screen. I had been lecturing about them with the film at The New School in New York for some years.

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I admire the blues women. They had a commanding presence and a refreshing robustness. They were nurturers, taking the yeast of experience, kneading it into dough, molding it and letting it grow in their minds to bring the listener bread for sustenance, shaped by their sensibilities. But they haven't had the respect or attention they deserve for their contribution to American music.

My purpose with this book is to give recognition to many formidable women who have been forgotten or ignored or barely acknowledged in the history and to correct those who have been recognized by showing them from another angle of vision, all of whom have made impressive contributions to the history of American blues and jazz.

Blues is basic to our music and has been for almost a century. Our current popular songs are influenced by the blues beat and its rhythms. *Time* magazine, when reviewing a Robert

Johnson blues CD in the April 17, 1995, issue underlined that fact and claimed Johnson, who first recorded in 1936, thirteen years after Bessie, was the "blues trailblazer."(sic!) The *Time* writer probably didn't know that Bessie's DOWNHEARTED BLUES sold three quarters of a million copies in 1923, an unprecedented figure for a black singer then. Or that Ethel Waters recorded JAZZIN BABY BLUES for the all-black record company, Black Swan, in 1922 and Alberta Hunter recorded that same song a couple of months later for Paramount. Nor could that writer have known that Ma Rainey recorded SEE SEE RIDER BLUES in 1924 which is still being sung today. Blues trailblazer in 1936?

Not only have our popular songs been deeply influenced by the blues beat and its rhythms but so are many of our American orchestral classics influenced by the blues, starting with George Gershwin's RHAPSODY IN BLUE in 1924. Our music is one of America's proud contributions to world art.

In our history of blues an inspiring body of work by women singers exists which has generally been overlooked or underestimated or misunderstood or misrepresented as not being serious in the sense that male blues singers and instrumentalists are. A handful of books acknowledge the women, and chapters in some others. I'm happy about those but we need more of them to place the women in their correct historic position as a significant part of this American music.

My intention is not to set down new rules for judging women artists but to acknowledge those women we already have in our history. To look at them seriously, not dismiss them as vaudeville or show-biz, thereby minimizing their importance to totally misjudging them, to reducing them to a single dimension when in fact their lives and art were full of complexities.

If we do not remember them, because so many have not been included in the history books, (I apologize to the hundreds, living and dead, who I didn't have room for here) we are doing damage to a significant part of our American past. The women's songs document that past and our collective memory is enriched from that knowledge.

This book is a correction about the use, function and meaning of the blues and how it spilled over into jazz. The blues was played and sung not only as an expression of sadness but also as celebration and joy. At a party or in a club where people are having a good time; the blues would be played as a joyous, fun music too. It was not only:

Daddy won't you please come home,
Mama's so all alone.

or

You can beat me, mistreat me,
But daddy don't ever leave me.

which are the kind that have been favored to be reissued for half a century. I will include many that have been ignored by the big companies like Ida Cox, the third in importance during the 1920s (only Bessie and Ma Rainey ranked higher) singing WILD WOMEN DON'T GET THE

BLUES or her ONE HOUR MAMMA;
 I'm a one-hour Mama,
 So no one-minute pappa ain't the kind of man for me.

Hardly a sad and lonely cry but one of fun and laughter from a woman who is making choices.

The singers' contribution to American culture, sometimes as art and sometimes as pop, is not controversial; nor is, for example, viewing Billie Holiday as a serious and great artist rather than as a pathetic victim of drug abuse. Or Bessie Smith, as a virtuoso rather than as a crude, low-class drunkard who is too often represented by "a pig foot and a bottle of beer." Both women added new territory to the map of American music; both set new standards for singers to come; yet they received no honors or prizes for their genius and distinction and have been maligned by too many.

My purpose is not to focus on the women as strong and independent because they sometimes sang such songs, which haven't been heard enough, as contrast to the victim variety which were favored by male producers. It is to show their variety of perspectives, a mix of what concerned them enough to sing about. We cannot be content with any simplistic view of them but must appreciate their multidimensionality. By shedding light on perceptions one woman might have as different from another of a shared experience like love or economic travail, will illustrate the contradictions and parallels in their lives.

In addition to giving recognition to deserving women singers whose contributions have not been valued enough or have been lost, it will also fill in the gaps in knowledge of these women's activities by writing down their histories; rectifying the failure of much previous literature to discuss the contexts in which the women functioned as singers; understand how they interacted with each other and suggesting the differences of the women as well as encountering their dramatic revelations and the abiding mysteries of their personalities.

The development of women's blues and jazz will become visible from the samples of songs as well as from the diversity from which the women chose to sing: from hallelujahing in praise of God, to love and or/sex, to unspeakable darkness like murderous rage. We will see these extremes and contradictions and how they were fused to survive in ordinary life. All of this, coming from a particular kind of American who used the blues to express herself. These were minds in command of a treasury of ideas, the foremost being musical but there was also visual (especially as performers) linguistic (slurring and stretching notes - the changing of lines, especially traditional ones - the response patterns of adding fresh material) social, communal, geographical and erotic. And we will see how their styles changed. We'll look at many women in our history who were once important and are mostly no longer known.

Some of the words and ideas of the songs may appear clumsy, not fully formed, imitative, perhaps even crude or haphazard but it is unfair to judge them as such without the music. One must keep in mind their origin with the music, a crucial element, for they were not intended to stand alone. It may be closer to the singer's intention to attend the songs as intimate theater.

In some cases, the words stand out and the music is allusive rather than specific, giving us a genuine clarity, no cobwebs. The poetry is illuminating, while other times, it is the music which dominates, but most of the time there is the persistent beat. As for the women who were known as jazz singers, I can only point out that real jazz couldn't exist without being informed by the blues.

Many of these blues songs are deeply a part of black vernacular speech and come from the oral tradition which manifests itself very clearly in the way preachers preach.

The question is: Can we rediscover talented singers who are unknown today but in their own time were very popular among their audiences? Of course we can if we want to, if we care enough, especially to sift through and find the giants among them. It is done all the time in other arts. With all the new technology we can retrieve originally recorded songs and clean up their pops and clicks and even get more from the original 78 rpm records than is audible when they are played on old machines. Strange as this may sound, the music is there, and now we have the technology to unearth more than we've ever heard by filtering out hisses and other impediments.

Taken together, the retrospective statement the songs make gives us information about our Foremothers no other text does. It reveals their wit, frivolity, irony, grief, in their own authentic voice of substance and distinction. This body of work, part of our American past, reveals how consequential this extraordinary cumulative wealth is: that of crystallization.

The songs project and articulate a growing range of the American female character, mood and experience. For all its variety, when put together, it is a coherent body of women's thought of half a century: a dazzling achievement.

From the earliest songs like CRAZY BLUES and DOWNHEARTED BLUES to ones we still hear on the radio sung by contemporaries like SEE SEE RIDER, ROCK ME DADDY and TROUBLE IN MIND, we hear the tone and the charge and tension of the language and music, the manner of expression with their twists and turns. All are distinctively the blues genre whether they are overcast with gospel, folk, country, jazz, r & b, soul, or pop.

The songs I cite reveal a more complicated system of ideas than most people thought existed. Some of the songs included might seem silly, and some are. But I have tried to be careful about that. For example, in 1957 Ruth Brown, a gorgeous voice and most expressive singer had a big hit on the Atlantic label, LUCKY LIPS which landed on the R & B charts. It was written by Lieber and Stoller, of HOUND DOG fame but I didn't include it in her chapter even though it had a lot of interesting historic detail surrounding it.

It was a crossover song, meaning blacks and whites were buying LUCKY LIPS sung by the original black artist herself, Ruth Brown. This was news at the time for a hit by a black artist was quickly "covered" by a white one to get air-play. Yes, Virginia, as late as 1957 many white stations were not playing recordings by black artists. In 1954 Ruth's hit OH WHAT A DREAM was covered by Patti Page and hit Billboard's Pop Chart but the original didn't because of the lack of air-play. Some things changed but not enough.

Teenagers were dancing to LUCKY LIPS on Alan Freed's TV show and were buying it

heavily. The music was good, bouncy, up-beat, and the singer was super, but true-blue as lyrics? No. No matter how much Ruth did to improve on the cliché, nor how much it sold: See for yourself:

Lucky lips are always kissin, lucky lips are never blue.
Lucky lips will always find, a pair of lips that will be true.

One must keep in mind, in all fairness, the words of these songs were never intended to be written out by themselves but to be heard in conjunction with music. It's also a matter of taste or distaste. Taste in music is as personal as taste in love. There are opera lovers who find the blues to be crude and rude while there are blues lovers who find opera artificial and mannered.

Perhaps some of my theories, too, might strike the reader as contentious, controversial, even unfair as in my "Placenta Theory," as one of the places blues comes from, but that's "all right with me." What I am attempting to do is first, not lose these precious women to time and second, not take them for granted, thereby ignoring how genuinely revolutionary they were artistically. If that makes you feel like talking back, I'll be glad to have provoked you into remembering the names of Trixie Smith and Lil Green.

Today, when we hear Louis Armstrong's 1928 WEST END BLUES or Coleman Hawkins 1939 BODY AND SOUL we accept these touchstones as great. Of course. It's written in the literature that they are, and our own ears confirm it. I still get thrilled when I listen to those particular renditions and continue to wonder how it was humanly possible for them to do that. They are now so much a part of American music that it may be difficult to realize how radical, how gigantic a departure they were at the time. Their individual quantum leaps catapulted our indigenous music light years ahead. They were space heroes, flying to the moon, drastically changing the sound of the music to come.

The point being, I am not trying to prove anything about the women that is not so, or present them as competitive with the men, not at all. Pops and Hawk are as much my true loves as are Bessie and Billie; it's just that the men have been championed valiantly by male writers and don't need me whereas the Queens, the Foremothers, the Big Mamas and the Shouters and Wailers have been mostly misrepresented or ignored by male writers and do need me.

The songs were written as songs, to be sung with music. There is music in poetry, if it's good, and certainly rhythm, but when both words and music work together a different magic is created. We are missing that in a book for we can't hear the way the singer intones the words, that can't be written out. For example, the musical beat may continue without a word, while the singer is silent; that can be powerful, placed right. There is the way the singer "plays" with the music when she stretches syllables and goes ahead or behind the beat. There are ways she uses words, maybe clipping them or drawing them out, sometimes even dropping syllables in addition to dropping ending "g"s.

So many intricate varieties happen when the two are designed to be done together that it takes a sympathetic ear, a getting used to, to read the words alone. One can't write in the sighs, moans and groans of a singer, or when she chooses to say, "yes," or "oh yeah," or "uh-huh " or

"oh" with no context, but it "plays" when the music is going along. And one can't write in the complicated textures of the music, its rhythmic blues beat, the polyrhythms which the singer may work with or work against.

Therefore this music poetry has to be read differently from "straight poetry" for a significant component is absent. Some lyrics read well and some don't, some need the music relationship more than others do. I am not excusing any songs, merely pointing out a discrepancy. I believe the lyrics to be important for what they tell us about the women.

The words of the songs, including those written by men for women, although many women wrote songs too, delineated every-day feelings which give us the women's perspective on the complicated cultural facts of their lives and thoughts about their aspirations, dreams and inevitable disappointments; their pleasures and perils, their spiritualism and their materialism and their view of life and death with its denials. For, after all, what are songs, like poetry, but a tribute to human complexities?

You may look for a particular woman or a particular song and not find it. Many are missing and I'm to blame. It's not that they fell through the cracks so much as I didn't have the room to include all the women and all the songs I'd like to. No doubt there are some which have escaped me. But this is not an encyclopedic work, if it were, it may not have been published. It is merely the work of a single person who loves what is here; who is obsessed by this music and is trying to prevent some of it from being forgotten.

The soul of blues has the power to evoke the poetry within us, the listeners. If we can suspend our own disbeliefs and be affected by its power to quicken life and transform us from practical survivors into poets of our own lives, we will be winners.

The true beauty of the blues must be heard to be appreciated. This artistry can't be spelled out on the page. The songs that I am presenting here is merely an attempt to help the listener to a larger understanding.

The problem of selection for each artist was a delightfully difficult one. If one of your favorite women is here without your favorite song, please bear with me. I wanted the songs to be representative of each woman, yet I also wanted to include those which may not be well known, to show her variety and range.

Sometimes it took days to select the songs as illustrations because the Blues Queens themselves were the reader over my shoulder, poking me with their strength to get it right. They told me what to do and I listened to them. They know better than anyone else.