

Female blues singers who weren't so blue

By Amy Duncan

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*Daddy, won't you please come home
'Cause your mama's so all alone. . .*

So wailed blues singers in the '20s, most of whom are gone, and many utterly forgotten. We tend to view those singers as victims of circumstances, and it's true that many blues songs are full of sorrow and self-pity. But there's a little-known body of blues songs with a whole different twist:

*I ain't no flapper, just a darn good gal
Don't want no sheik, just a real good pal*

Rosa Henderson sang these words to "Can't Be Bothered With No Sheik" back in the '20s. But how many people know about that kind of blues song? If record producer Rosetta Reitz has any say in the matter, a lot more people will know about what she calls "independent women's blues," exemplified in songs such as Bessie Smith's "Ain't Gonna Play No Second Fiddle" and this one, sung by blues singer Susie Edwards, who used to level these sentiments at her partner, Butterbeans, in "No-Count Triflin' Man":

*You don't mean right and you ain't
nothin,' mister
But a no-count triflin' man
You said those sweet things so many
times before
It's a wonder that your jaws ain't sore*

For the past three years, Rosetta Reitz has been lovingly and painstakingly producing reissues of forgotten and little-known black women blues singers, with an emphasis on the feisty and self-sufficient in their music. A dedicated jazz historian, she has researched black women jazz singers and musicians for many years, uncovering a wealth of excellent music along with fascinating facts of these women's lives and the era they lived in.

A jazz buff since her high school days, Rosetta says, "I've been listening to jazz for a very long time. When the women's movement started I began to wonder why jazz has always been considered a male domain. Where were the women? Why weren't there more than just a handful of them?"

This prompted her to go back to the early days of jazz and find out why there had been so few women in the field. What she found was that there were plenty of women in jazz then - they were around, all right, but nobody remembers them. Ms. Reitz took a special interest in the black women blues singers of the '20s and began the search for recordings and information about them. She discovered trumpeter Valaida Snow and pianist-singer Georgia White, along with a bevy of long-forgotten blues singers. She also discovered that these women were the reigning queens of the blues era, from 1920 to 1927, with three women at the forefront: Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, and Ma Rainey

Rosetta remarked: "They had power. They hired the musicians and the chorus line, a lot of them wrote the music themselves, and they produced their own shows. They were more than just singers; they were symbols of success. When they would stand on the stage in their fancy finery and their jewels, what they were essentially saying was, 'The sun's gonna shine in my back door someday, and everything's gonna be all right.' "

Ms. Reitz views this phenomenon of the blues singers as a happy, uplifting, hopeful time for these women, and yet "the thing that interested me was this: Why did we always think of the blues as sad songs? Why didn't we know that there were these independent ones, where the women spoke out, where they confronted their lives with unblinking candor?"

She has never really discovered the answer to that question. The simple fact is, their recordings were seldom heard again

Although she is now very happy with her decision to start her own record label, it wasn't an easy decision. It took her six years to think it over and come to the conclusion that she could do it on her own. But it was her acquaintance with these blues singers that made her feel she had found her niche.

Ms. Reitz now has 10 albums on the market on her Rosetta Records label, including her Independent Women's Blues series - "Mean Mothers" (RR 1300), "Big Mamas" (RR 1306), and "Super Sisters" (RR 1308) - as well as "Piano Singer's Blues" (RR 1303), Ida Cox's "Wild Women Don't Have the Blues" (RR 1304), and "Hot Snow" (RR 1305), with trumpeter Valaida Snow. Soon to be released are "Georgia White Sings & Plays" (RR 1307) and "Boogie Blues, Women Sing & Play Boogie Woogie" (RR 1309). She has about 10 distributors throughout the country who sell to stores, so her records are available in major cities.

Ms. Reitz also plans to publish a book on the subject sometime next year, tentatively titled "Mean Mothers Shout the Blues." Rosetta has also collected film clips of these grand blues ladies, which she shows in conjunction with a lecture she has been giving around the country, "Shouters and Wailers." For information about the records, write Rosetta Records, 115 West 16th Street, New York, N.Y. 10011.