

Was Bessie Smith a Feminist?

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Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (Pantheon Books, 1998)

I Can't Be Satisfied: Early American Women Blues Singers—Town & Country. Vol. 1, *Country*; Vol. 2, *Town* (Yazoo, 1997)

The blues has always been about secrets. From the beginning, blues singers confided about conjure women, backdoor men, and the mysteries of human behavior. When a singer moaned, "I mistreated my baby, and I can't see no reason why," it rang like a bewildered confession, a secret not even the singer understood. In blues lore, secrets followed blues singers like shadows, and it never mattered whether the story about the Faustian midnight bargain was truth or promotional hokum. Either way, it imbued the music with a persuasive clandestine authority. Indeed, the basic communicative power of blues music rested on another secret: how to transform so many tales of pain and struggle into entertainment, pleasure, and joy. All of these secrets intersected in the blues' veiled language of signifyin(g) and innuendo. Black singers and musicians since the era of slave spirituals artfully conveyed multiple simultaneous messages in their music; the sweet jelly rolls, juicy lemons, and proud roosters on blues records constituted a vital blues vocabulary.

Given this proliferation of secrets, one should be wary of accepting at face value the predominance of love and sex in blues songs. This represents something much more complex than a preoccupation with these themes per se. As Angela Davis notes in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, sexual relations represented one of the only autonomous dimensions of life for the African Americans who created and popularized blues music in the half century after emancipation. Consequently, songs about love and sex were the vehicle used to express a broad array of concerns about personal and social freedom.

Although information is scarce on the nineteenth-century origins of the blues, Paul Oliver has shown that the style was forged in the wake of the Civil War and existed before it got its name.¹ In the first decades of the twentieth century, Southern traveling variety shows then propagated—some would say commercialized—the blues, as did the published blues compositions of W. C. Handy and others. The blues was not permanently enshrined in American culture, however, until the blues recording boom of the 1920s vaunted the talents of singers like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey. In the beginning, blues recording was a female domain; the most famous early male blues singers—Charley Patton, Big Bill Broonzy, Robert Johnson—did not record until the late 1920s or 1930s.

Although Bessie Smith became one of the decade's biggest stars, she and other blues singers failed to impress some African Americans. As Hazel V. Carby has demonstrated, women blues singers were generally shunned by the black middle classes, especially women, who saw the blues as an expression of the most debased or retrograde aspects of African-American life. With the National Association of Colored Women and the black women's club movement, the early twentieth century was an era of organization and activism and marked the emergence of a vital feminist tradition for black middle-class women. Yet working-class and poor rural black women were systematically excluded from the middle-class institutions and were occasionally targeted by them for invidious forms of "uplift."²

Drawing on Carby's analysis and her own work in *Women, Race, and Class*, Angela Davis argues that the women blues singers of the 1920s expressed and addressed the concerns and needs of poor and working-class black women denied formal institutional outlets. Davis sets out to use the blues as a means to find a secret tradition of working-class black feminism that existed alongside the black middle-class tradition. Searching for "hints of feminist attitudes" in the music (p. xi), she devotes the bulk of her study to scrutinizing the lyrics of the recorded songs of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. (Although included in the title, Billie Holiday receives the least—and weakest—analysis.) This exploration into the feminist dimensions of women's blues continues the revealing work begun in the 1980s by Rosetta Reitz, Sandra Leib, and Daphne Duval Harrison,³ but comparatively, Davis casts the narrowest net. By her own admission, she has only limited interest in understanding the blues in its historical context and is principally concerned with "how these

women's performances appear through the prism of the present" (p. xi).

Although songs about love and sexual relationships make up the greatest part of the oeuvre, Davis shows that an important number of songs about other topics—travel, working conditions, social justice—existed as well. In some cases, Davis identifies unequivocal protest (Bessie Smith's "Poor Man Blues"), whereas in others, she pieces together arguments from songs with less obvious meanings. In these, she often stresses that announcing a problem constitutes the necessary first step in resolving it. In examining a number of songs about abusive partners, for example, Davis asserts that by mentioning domestic violence publicly, these songs made possible later actions of consciousness-raising and public protest. In a similar style of roots-searching, Davis makes the interesting argument that songs in which the singer gives advice to female listeners may be heard as fostering inchoate feelings of sisterhood and solidarity. Some of her analyses, however, hang precariously on her interpretation of the singer's delivery of a particular line, and this mode of speculative judgment raises unanswered questions about the singer's intent and the audiences' interpretations. Although Davis often strains to fit the song lyrics into her arguments, the book's underlying thesis succeeds by virtue of the overwhelming amount of textual evidence she is able to marshal.

In his 1964 review of LeRoi Jones's *Blues People*, Ralph Ellison quipped, "The tremendous burden of sociology that Jones would place upon this body of music is enough to give even the blues the blues." Unfortunately, despite Davis's often provocative contentions, her programmatic approach to the music and the singers has exactly this effect. At the outset of the study, Davis admits that "to impute [to the singers] a feminist con-

sciousness as we define it today . . . would be preposterous, and not very interesting at that" (p. xi), yet by the conclusion of her analysis of the blues in Harlem, she claims Bessie Smith was "an anachronism" with a "decidedly black feminist consciousness . . . pervad[ing] her work" (p. 160). Her individual analyses are driven less by her sources than by her passionate desire to uncover the secret history of black feminism. This leads her to ignore completely the historical factors such as audiences and performance contexts that cre-

ated meaning in the music at least as much as recordings did.

The women blues singers of the 1920s were never known simply as recording artists: They

achieved their fame and cultural influence through spectacular live performances filled with dancing, comedy, lavish costumes, and expensive jewelry. At the peak of popularity, Bessie Smith also impressed fans with her private railroad car, as Ma Rainey did with her private touring bus emblazoned with her name on the side. Their impact was felt not only in their outspokenness on record but also in their strong, charismatic personalities, their prominence as public figures, their financial independence, and their reputations as exquisite artists. Audiences included women and men, rural and urban, and in the South at least, white as well as black (though audiences were frequently segregated). Acknowledging that the blues stars' recording careers were contingent upon these broad, diverse audiences, we recognize that what

the blues communicated was much more varied and complex than a program for an incipient working-class feminism.

Even if Davis's real interest lies in the *legacy* of these recordings and not in the singers or their context, she does not show a direct, empirical link between the profeminist themes in the recorded songs and the development of subsequent self-conscious traditions of black feminism. Davis makes an important political argument from her readings of women's blues, but it does not

adequately explore the myriad and subtle ways the women's blues legacy has been handed down. Since the 1920s, for example, Ma Rainey's impact has prob-

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ably owed more to legend than to the scratchy, poorly recorded records whose lyrics even Davis concedes are often hard to understand. Rainey's influence has been felt not simply through her own recorded music but also through poems (Sterling Brown), songs (Memphis Minnie, Bob Dylan), and plays (August Wilson), as well as through the legend that she had been Bessie Smith's mentor in the years before they recorded.

The ultimate appeal and power of the blues have always rested on its artistry and pathos, not its agenda. Although Davis certainly has a rich and revealing subject in the sexual politics of women's blues, her work would have benefited greatly from an increased attention to the limitations of her methods. The strength of *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* lies in its forceful reassertion that the

women blues singers of the 1920s were, in Rosetta Reitz's phrase, "fresh and feisty, not victims." Ma Rainey laid bare this sentiment in "Memphis Bound Blues" (1925): "I talk because I'm

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stubborn, I sing because I'm free."

If asked to choose a sound track for the Great Migration, we might do well to select the recent two-CD collection, *I Can't Be Satisfied: Early American Women Blues Singers—Town and Country*. The disks contain forty-six songs by thirty-two different singers, who range from famous (Ma Rainey) to once-famous (Lucille Bogan) to decidedly obscure (Geeshie Wiley). Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Alberta Hunter, and Ida Cox are noticeably absent (for licensing reasons, perhaps), but this actually enhances the collection by leaving more room for lesser-known artists. Indeed, one of the greatest strengths of this revealing collection lies in the broad picture it offers of the diverse culture of women's blues.

Hazel Carby has argued that women blues singers mediated the "moral panic" that erupted over the sexual and social behavior of black women during the Great Migration, and the proud, assertive singers on this collection support that argument well. They sang openly about sexuality when most middle-class institutions displaced or suppressed black women's sexuality to avoid confronting the complicated sexual politics of the new urban circumstances. As in Davis's book, love and sex are the most frequent themes, and amid tales of

heartbreak and mistreatin' men, one hears resounding protest in songs like Sara Martin's "He's Never Gonna Throw Me Down" and Hattie Burleson's "Bye Bye Blues." The singers in this collection gave voice to a host of other contempo-

rary social issues as well, including economic hardship (Lucille Bogan's "Pay Roll Blues"), drunkenness (Lillian Miller's "Dead Drunk Blues"), and homelessness (Memphis Minnie's "Outdoor Blues"). Not all these songs signaled explicit remonstrance, but they did at least call honest attention to the problems many listeners faced.

Much of the material in the collection reinforces Davis's thesis, and it expands the protofeminist expression best highlighted on Rosetta Records's excellent women's blues collections from the 1980s and early 1990s. Disappointingly, however, the Yazoo disks lack the same well-documented, forceful presentation as the Rosetta reissues. The liner notes offer valuable biographical information about the singers (few of whom are listed in Sheldon Harris's encyclopedic *Blues Who's Who*) but little comment on the social context of the music or the significance of town-and-country women's blues as an organizing principle for the collection.

Although the first disk is labeled *Country* and the second, *Town*, the division between these is far from clear. On one level, the designations refer to differing musical styles, but as Don Kent admits in his liner notes, "[T]he distinction between urban and rural singers was and is often arbitrary." The city/town blues that dominated most of the 1920s—

what has been termed “classic blues”—was a smooth, vaudeville-influenced singing style, with accompaniment usually consisting of either a solo piano player or a highly polished jazz combo. The country style was marked by a rougher, more “down home” sound, sometimes with accompanying piano but often with solo guitar or jug band. (Although Ma Rainey appears on the *Town* disk and is often grouped with the classic blues singers, her music is more consistent with the country style, and she always enjoyed much greater popularity in rural areas than in urban ones.) The neat dichotomy between country and town should not hide the fact that the most successful singers on both disks made their professional careers in urban environments. Not only was urban nightlife a magnet for the most talented performers, but working as a practiced professional singer was rarely an option in diffuse rural areas.

Moreover, the organization of the collection blurs the fact that the history of blues recording generally followed the reverse direction of the Great Migration, that is, from city to country. The classic style reigned for most of the 1920s but faded beginning around 1927 with the decline of the Theater Owners Booking Association and the rise of swing jazz. Recording of country-style blues followed in its wake, but this form was dominated largely by male performers. Most of the singers on the *Town* disk—Victoria Spivey, Clara Smith, Sippie Wallace, Bertha “Chippie” Hill, for example—were national stars in the mid-1920s and will be familiar to many listeners. However, very few of the singers on the *Country* disk achieved any significant national fame, which makes this the far more intriguing of the two disks. Unfortunately, the packaging of these disks masks this transition in recording. Not only does the *Country* volume precede the *Town* volume, but the liner

notes also omit information about recording dates. Although the covers promise “classic recordings of the 1920s,” Robert Dixon and John Godrich’s *Blues and Gospel Records, 1902–1943* reveals that almost half of the songs on the country disk were recorded after 1930.

These elisions notwithstanding, this important collection offers a variety of outstanding voices from the Great Migration, reflecting the full range of women’s experiences. Bertha Lee (Charley Patton’s wife) sings of hoodoo power in the Mississippi Delta, Jennie Mae Clayton and Hattie Burleson offer voices from the growing Southern cities, and Sippie Wallace and Victoria Spivey exude the confidence of Northern professionalism. With emotions stretching from joy to despair, optimism to disgust, these songs open a window onto the problems, pleasures, and contradictions of changing social conditions. For most women, change held the promise of improvement, and the songs reflect women’s seriousness about pursuing better conditions. As Hattie Burleson sang defiantly, “If you don’t believe I’m leavin’ Dallas town, just watch the train I’m on.”

Notes

1. See Paul Oliver, “That Certain Feeling: Blues and Jazz . . . in 1890?” *Popular Music* 10 (1) (1991):11–19.
2. See Carby’s two essential blues-related articles, “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues,” *Radical America* 20 (4) (1987):8–22, and “Policing the Black Woman’s Body in an Urban Context,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Summer 1992):738–55.
3. In 1980, Rosetta Reitz established her path-breaking Rosetta Records label. Issuing collections of long-out-of-print women’s blues packaged with extensive analytical essays and countless rare photographs, Reitz’s work has been indispensable to subsequent investigations of women’s blues. For Lieb and Harrison, see Sandra R. Lieb, *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey* (n.p.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981); Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988).