



## Blues Music

by Carla Williams

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Gertrude "Ma" Rainey  
circa 1923.  
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Blues music as it flourished in the 1920s was women's music. Although it grew out of African-American spirituals and a tradition of itinerant male singers in the rural South, female performers defined and popularized the genre, originally through performances on the black vaudeville and minstrel show circuits.

Most black performers traveled on the Theater Owner's Booking Association, or T.O.B.A. circuit, establishing an avid loyal following with black audiences and building up solid reputations before the advent of recording. Although most of these theaters were in the South, New York and especially Chicago became essential centers for blues performers and their audiences.

### Early Recordings

In 1920 Mamie Smith became the first woman of color to make an audio recording; the first vocal blues record was her "Crazy Blues." Written by Perry Bradford, it was a tremendous success on the Okeh label, selling more than 100,000 copies in its first month of release and officially ushering in the era of "race records"--records marketed expressly at black consumers--and the popularity of the blues.

Publishers rushed to capitalize on this previously unconsidered market, quickly employing popular club singers such as Alberta Hunter to make recordings to meet the burgeoning demand for blues music. Singers were paid a one-time fee for each usable "side" and the early artists were generally chosen for their vocal appeal to a crossover audience.

Hence, Bessie Smith's first attempt at recording was rejected as "too rough," but in 1923 her version of Hunter's "Down-Hearted Blues" would sell more than three quarters of a million copies in less than six months, establishing Smith as the undisputed "Empress of the Blues."

### Ma Rainey

If Bessie Smith was the "Empress" or sometimes "Queen" of the blues, then Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, a veteran traveling show performer who gave Smith her professional start, was the "Mother of the Blues." Rainey was the first popular woman blues singer, performing and traveling with her husband William "Pa" Rainey in tent shows.

Having performed on the road for more than twenty-five years, Rainey received a recording contract in 1923 and made more than 100 recordings in just six years. In 1984, forty-five years after her death, she became the subject of August Wilson's award-winning Broadway play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, a fictional account of a recording session titled for one of her well-known songs.

Among the other blues "royalty" was Clara Smith, dubbed "Queen of the Moaners." Bessie and Clara were two of the "five blues-singing Smiths," as they were called, which also included Mamie, Laura, and Trixie,

although none of the women were related. Bessie and Clara, however, occasionally claimed to be sisters. They recorded several duets, an unusual arrangement for Bessie, who generally would not allow another blues singer on the same bill as herself.

While men wrote many blues compositions, Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Hunter, along with Ida Cox, pianist Lovie Austin, and other women composed the music and lyrics for many of the songs they performed and recorded. Typically, however, these early artists did not retain copyright to their compositions, though in later years Hunter fought to gain control over the material she had written.

### **Sexuality in Blues Music**

The most persistent theme in blues lyrics revolved around man--and sometimes woman--troubles, but other recurrent themes included poverty; drinking and drug use; violence and criminal behavior, particularly passion killing; prostitution; traveling, usually by train; and political protest.

Sexuality played a significant role in blues music. Colorful metaphors of "jelly rolls," "peach trees," "handy men," and others were widely used to veil thinly frank talk of sexual desire and satisfaction. The emphasis on sexual satisfaction for women was itself radical in the 1920s.

Although blues lyricists were masters of double entendres regarding sexuality, contemporary audiences recognized and accepted these references, including allusions to homosexuality.

Rainey's composition "Prove It on Me Blues" is perhaps the best known explicit statement of lesbianism and transvestism in a blues song:

They said I do it, ain't nobody caught me  
Sure got to prove it on me  
Went out last night with a crowd of my friends  
They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men

It's true I wear a collar and a tie...  
Talk to the gals just like any old man...

Similarly, Rainey's "Sissy Blues" plainly describes losing her man to another man, or "sissy," named "Kate." Tellingly, it lacks any moralizing tone.

Another singer, Lucille Bogan, also known as Bessie Jackson, was known for her extremely risqué material. As Jackson, Bogan recorded "B.D. [Bull-Dykers] Woman's Blues" in 1935. Bulldaggers, Bogan insists, "can lay their jive just like a natural man / B.D. women sure is rough; they drink up many a whiskey and sure can strut their stuff."

### **Bisexual and Lesbian Performers**

Such explicit material was commonplace in early blues songs, and many early blues performers, including Rainey, Smith, Hunter, and Gladys Bentley were openly bisexual or lesbian.

In 1925 Rainey was arrested for indecency after being caught naked with a group of women at a private party; Bessie Smith bailed her out, and they would often joke about the awkward yet humorous incident afterward (the still-undressed Rainey fell down the stairs trying to get away).

Smith, though also married, likewise made no secret of her numerous affairs with women. Bentley, described by Langston Hughes as "a large, dark masculine lady," was acclaimed for her bulldagger image and gender performance.

Other renowned blues singers of the era included Sippie Wallace and Ethel Waters. Called "Sweet Mama Stringbean," Waters went on to a successful Oscar-nominated film career.

### **Later Blues Singers**

Vaudeville and blues music began to fall out of fashion around the time of the Great Depression, giving way to the rising popularity of motion pictures and the more upbeat jazz music. Male performers such as Muddy Waters or B.B. King who are today more readily associated with the genre did not emerge in popularity until the 1950s.

In the 1950s female singers such as Ruth Brown, Koko Taylor, Dinah Washington, and Big Mama Thornton revived the tradition of the remarkably gutsy, pioneering female performers. Thornton, a powerful performer who frequently dressed in masculine clothing, released "Hound Dog" in 1953, three years before Elvis Presley's rendition.

Classic women's blues music experienced a resurgence of popularity in the 1960s and 1970s with the re-release of Bessie Smith's catalog, as well as the spectacular reemergence of Hunter in 1977 following a 20-year career hiatus.

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