

Olivia Jankoski

Professor Maria Sonevytsky

Music, Gender, and Sexuality

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Where Girls Will Be Boys

The Blues evolved post-abolition as a musical genre from its roots in Gospel music. Like its predecessor, which developed during slavery, the Blues was a uniquely African American art form that held the promise of freedom from oppression in its lyrics. Gospel music, with its focus on the sacred, held the hope of deliverance from slavery in the idea of heaven and the afterlife. The Blues, however, had its focus on the secular need for immediate gratification; it promised freedom from all kinds of oppression, especially sexual repression. African Americans were no longer the property of owners who had the right to choose their slaves' breeding partners, or who took sexual advantage of them at will. African American women were, for the first time, able to choose who they partnered with in their personal lives, and they could decide if and when they wanted to leave a particular relationship. While black men continued to lead the formalized church and religious-themed revival meetings, women's voices became the vehicle of this new sexuality, and they quickly overtook men as the dominant voice of the Blues. Male Blues singers celebrated their freedom with songs of travelling and wandering without the burden of home or obligations. The female singer, however, enthusiastically celebrated ownership over herself, and her songs preached about the thrill of indulging her appetites. The founding mothers of the genre wrote and sang about matters that once were only spoken about in private, or not at all, and they

went on to inspire African American art, life, and culture throughout the Twentieth Century and beyond.

The Blues turned traditional domestic roles upside down by allowing black women to voice their sexual desire and unwillingness to take on white American idealized notions of femininity, motherhood, and marriage. They could be, like Ida Cox's song suggests, *Wild Women*, who engaged in drunkenness, promiscuity, and domestic violence – just like their men – and they overtly rejected social norms and expectations. The Blues empowered black women to demand and command respect as they challenged their supposed inferiority with their “rough and tumble” (Davis 1998; 37) version of femininity and their comfort with bisexual and homosexual relationships.

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's and 30's, a social and cultural phenomenon that rose out of the African American migration from the South to the North and West Coast after the Civil War, was the perfect breeding ground for the Blues. New York City's Harlem was the equivalent of Italy's Florence, a place of great creativity with a focus on worldly pleasures, and the swath of 133rd Street that ran between Seventh and Lenox Avenues where most of the nightlife occurred was nicknamed “Jungle Alley” (Queer Cultural Center). It had “a unique atmosphere of social permissiveness” (Day 2016) that accepted all forms of sexuality and gender expression and allowed queer artists to flourish.

In the underground scene of gay-friendly private parties, nightspots and speakeasies, like New York's Clam House and San Francisco's Mona's 440 Club, Gladys Bentley was a popular openly gay celebrity. Bentley, known as “the Brown Bomber of Sophisticated Songs,” (Ring 2017) dressed in a tuxedo and top hat and wore her hair close-cropped in a more masculine style.

She had a powerful singing voice that poet Langston Hughes called “an amazing exhibition of musical energy” (Ring 2017). Gladys sang explicitly sexual songs to huge audiences of mostly gay fans without fear of rejection or repercussion, often changing the lyrics of traditional Blues standards to make direct references to lesbian sexuality. She flirted with female audience members during her performances and claimed to have married one of her white lovers in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Because the law at the time forced Blues singers to tone down the lewd references in published songs, none of the 20 or so recordings of Bentley’s music actually captures her true spirit.

However permissive the movement was, the headliners still kept their sexual preferences somewhat under wraps. They were “open to an extent about their queer proclivities,” (Day 2016) but they manipulated language in their songs to hide their true meaning. The “big three of the Blues” (Day 2016), Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Lucille Bogan (aka Bessie Jackson), were among the most skilled at double entendre, in both their life and lyrics.

Born Gertrude Pridgett in Georgia in 1886 just 23 years after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, Ma Rainey got her name and musical start when she married fellow southern performer Will “Pa” Rainey. She was already well known by the time she became part of the Harlem Renaissance and is considered the Blues’ greatest performer. Her act combined Blues with vaudeville and included comedy acts and chorus girls and boys wearing fancy costumes, and the stage had elaborate scenery and special lighting effects to enhance the mood of the song Ma was singing. Some historians attribute the mostly-white flapper clothing craze of the Jazz Age to the influence of Blues performers’ costumes and style of dress. While not an especially pretty woman, called by singer Alberta Hunter “the ugliest woman in the

business,” (“Ma Rainey: The Life and Music of “The Mother of the Blues”.”) the stocky Rainey loved wearing glittering headbands, satin gowns, high heels, false eyelashes, jeweled necklaces, feather boas, her signature gold teeth, and lots of makeup. One member of her travelling troupe commented on Ma’s performance look with the humorous “You can take a little powder, take a little paint, and make you look like what you ain’t” (“Ma Rainey: The Life and Music of “The Mother of the Blues”.”).

Aside from theatrical enhancements, the audience really came for Rainey’s powerful singing. Ma’s voice was a big, deep contralto that “sounded rough and unsophisticated ... but projected a great depth of feeling,” (“Ma Rainey: The Life and Music of “The Mother of the Blues”.”) and her audiences were equally filled with black and white fans throughout her career. At her tent shows, when whites outnumbered blacks, they sat in the black section just glad to be part of the audience. When she began recording her music, an ad campaign promoting the sale of her 78 rpm records dubbed her “The Mother of the Blues” (“Ma Rainey: The Life and Music of “The Mother of the Blues”.”). When she spun around during a performance and slapped her “ample behind,” Ma started a dance craze called “The Black Bottom” (“Ma Rainey: The Life and Music of “The Mother of the Blues”.”).

Like traditional Blues songs, Ma Rainey’s repertoire included themes of domestic violence, infidelity, murder, and sexuality, but she was unafraid to make allusions to bi- and homosexuality. In *Prove It on Me Blues*, whose title is a challenge to the law that prohibited same-sex activity which she wrote after her 1925 arrest for participating in an all-female orgy, she sings:

I went out last night with a crowd of my friends,

*It must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men.
 Wear my clothes just like a fan,
 Talk to the gals just like any old man.
 Don't you say I do it, ain't nobody caught me.
 You sure got to prove it on me."*

The ad for *Prove It on Me Blues* recording featured Ma Rainey in a 3-piece suit with a fedora hat flirting with a couple of very feminine women while a police officer watches from the background. Pretty daring stuff for 1928. In *Shave 'Em Dry Blues*, Rainey gets raunchy by alluding to what seems like heated lesbian sex:

*Here's one thing I don't understand,
 Why a good-looking woman likes a workin' man,
 hey, hey, hey, daddy, let me shave 'em dry.*

In *Bo-Weevil Blues*, the reference is a bit sweeter:

*I don't want no man
 To put no sugar in my tea,
 Some of them are so evil,
 I'm 'fraid they might poison me.*

Ma Rainey was a kind and generous woman who helped many young performers break into the business. Her protégé and possible occasional lover, the younger Bessie Smith, got her start in 1912 with Rainey's travelling troupe, the Moss Stokes Company, and she learned a lot about how to entertain an audience. Smith's showmanship was different from her mentor's because she was "an all-around entertainer" ("Bessie Smith.") who could dance, act, and do comedy. However, it was her deep, smooth singing voice that earned her the title "The Empress

of the Blues” (“Bessie Smith Biography.”). Bessie was a versatile singer whose “sense of the dramatic,” (“Bessie Smith Biography.”) clear pronunciation, and musical timing eventually caused her career to surpass Ma Rainey’s.

Keeping with the traditional Blues style and the need to keep her bisexuality hidden, Smith wrote and sang songs about the life she knew growing up in the Jim Crow South that included abusive men, domestic dissatisfaction, and the pleasures of heterosexual love. She wrote about “everyday experiences ... related in plain spoken language” (“Bessie Smith.”) that made her music accessible to almost every African American woman. Because Bessie had a positive way of looking at adversity, many of her hardship songs are actually “tales of liberated women” (“Bessie Smith.”). Smith also wrote a large number of her own songs and proved herself to be among the best at word play. One of her biggest hits, *Empty Bed Blues*, is a good example of her word craft and her ability to put a good spin on a bad situation:

*I woke up this morning with a awful aching head ...
 My new man had left me, just a room and a empty bed
 Bought me a coffee grinder that's the best one I could find ...
 Oh he could grind my coffee, 'cause he had a brand new grind
 He's a deep sea diver with a stroke that can't go wrong ...
 He can stay at the bottom and his wind holds out so long
 He knows how to thrill me and he thrills me night and day ...
 He's got a new way of loving, almost takes my breath away
 Lord he's got that sweet somethin' and I told my girlfriend Lou ...
 From the way she's raving, she must have gone and tried it too*

During the years that she was married, Smith toured extensively to both keep her distance from a physically abusive husband and to indulge her bisexuality. She was known to have many female lovers on the road, and it is extensively quoted that she yelled at her lover Lillian Simpson during an argument “The hell with you, bitch. I got twelve women on this show and I can have one every night if I want it” (Day 2016).

Bessie’s popularity and reputation grew during the 1920’s, and she performed with some of the greatest performers of the time like Benny Goodman and Louis Armstrong. She recorded over 160 songs in the ten-year period from 1923 to 1933, and she was usually paid around \$2,000 a week to perform. Smith’s fame made her wealthy and allowed her to bypass some of the racial (and sexual) prejudice that was prevalent in American society. She bought a “custom-designed railroad car” (“Bessie Smith Biography.”) so that she and her troupe could travel with their own tent show and could stay in luxury accommodations when travelling where “Whites Only” restrictions were prevalent. Because Bessie Smith was the highest paid African American female entertainer in the world at the time, she could sometimes take risks in her performances. Smith sometimes sang a different version of *Empty Bed Blues* that changed the lyrics to suit her mood:

*I want a deep sea diving woman that got a stroke that can't go wrong.
Yeah, touch that bottom, gal, hold it all night long*

In her *The Boy in the Boat* song, Bessie got braver still with a bold reference to the women-only parties that were popular during the Renaissance:

When you see two women walking hand in hand,

*Just look 'em over and try to understand:
They'll go to those parties – have the lights down low –
Only those parties where women can go.*

Bessie Smith enjoyed the appearance of a traditionally feminine woman; she loved glamorous clothing and carried herself in an elegant manner. Like many of her peers, she was able to pass as heterosexual with the general public. Those singers who embraced their homosexuality and preferred a “butch” appearance, however, were given the insulting “bulldagger” or “bull dyke” label (Day 2016). Instead of taking offense, these women celebrated who they were in appearance and in their songs. Lucille Bogan, the third of “the big three” was a Blues diva who was “comfortable making people uncomfortable” (Day 2016). She is considered a dirty Blues musician whose lyrics were “as nasty as recorded music ever got” (“Lucille Bogan.”) at the time. She was a trailblazer and among the first Blues artists ever to be recorded. Bogan, who eventually changed her name to Bessie Jackson, favored songs about hard drinking, prostitution, infidelity, lesbianism, alcoholism, drug addiction, and physical abuse, most of which were “tempered with a sense of humor” (“Lucille Bogan.”). The titles speak for themselves: *Sweet Petunia* (a reference to female genitalia), *Tricks Ain't Walkin' No More, Tight Like That, Whisky Cravin' Blues*, and *Black Angel Blues* with the lyrics “I just love how she spread her wings!” (“Lucille Bogan.”)

Bogan's *B. D. Woman Blues* was an anthem of sorts for African American women who “were in the life” (Hix 2013) of the “out” butch (bulldagger) lesbian:

*Comin' a time, B. D. women ain't gonna need no men ...
Oh the way they treat us is a lowdown and dirty sin.*

*B. D. Women, you sure can't understand ...
 They got a head like a sweet angel and they walk just like a natural man.
 B. D. women, they all done learnt their plan ...
 They can lay their jive just like a natural man.
 B. D. women, B. D. women, you know they sure is rough ...
 They all drink up plenty whiskey and they sure will strut their stuff.*

In 1935, recording as Bessie Jackson, Bogan did her own version of Ma Rainey's *Shave 'Em Dry Blues* that was probably recorded for fun (you can hear Jackson snicker on the recording) or for clandestine distribution as a 'Party Record.' To say the song uses explicit sexual references is like mistaking Jack the Ripper for Mr. Rogers:

*I got nipples on my titties, big as the end of my thumb
 I got somethin' between my legs 'll make a dead man come
 Oh daddy, baby won't you shave 'em dry?
 Want you to grind me baby, grind me until I cry*

A review of some of Bogan's work left one critic undecided – "Twenty tracks of historically important socio-sexual commentary. Or just a big bunch of dirty songs" ("Lucille Bogan.").

Alberta Hunter and Ethel Waters were among the great Blues divas of the 1920's who lived very private lesbian lives and went to great lengths to conceal their sexuality from the public. Both women defied social norms by living with their long-time female lovers, considered a "disreputable act" (Hix 2013) at the time, and they made sure to avoid explicit sexual references in their songs and public behavior. Waters performed with her lover, the dancer Ethel Williams, and called their act "The Two Ethels," (Hix 2013) but that was as far as she allowed their relationship to be on display. Hunter, who found great success in the "refined

cabaret scene” (Hix 2013) of Europe, only once directly pointed to her sexual preference when she improvised an ending to a song in one of her performances:

*If you didn't want me, tell me to my face
'Cause five or six women long to take your place*

Because Blues singers sang each other's songs and swapped lyrics from older Blues standards into their own songs from time to time, it was easy for Alberta to claim that she was “just borrowing a lyric from some old blues song you'd never heard of” (Day 2016).

Alberta Hunter was a petite, pretty woman who had a reserved nature and did not drink, or smoke, or do drugs. On stage, however, she whipped the audience into a frenzy by setting up “a rhythmic momentum ... and emphasized the beat of her songs ... by slapping her thighs, clapping her hands, and snapping her long fingers” (Wilson 1984) Ethel Waters was her polar opposite. She was a tall 5'9”, hard drinking, angry woman who was known to have public arguments that ended up in the tabloids. Waters described herself as a mite savage, and director Elia Kazan said Ethel was a truly odd combination of old-time religiosity and free-flowing hatred. She had an aggressively sexy stage presence even though she was not a classically beautiful woman. This, together with her smooth, soft, sophisticated, and mature singing voice made her one of the lucky Blues singers from the 1920's who was able to transition to the big screen in Hollywood's talking movies. Waters could also transition to Broadway where she continued the sexual innuendo Blues tradition. In the show “Blackbirds of 1930” she sang *My Handy Man Ain't Handy No More*:

*He don't perform his duties like he used to do. . .
He says he isn't lazy, claims he isn't old*

But still he sits 'round and lets my stove get cold.

Waters was a regular headliner at Harlem's Cotton Club, and she performed and recorded with Jazz greats like Duke Ellington. She "brought all of her suffering, style, and interpretive artistry" to her version of the old ballad *Stormy Weather*, and it became her "signature song" ("Ethel Waters.").

As the Jazz Age and the Harlem Renaissance began to wane, traditional Blues naturally began to evolve into more modern styling. Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton, who was born during the heyday of Blues in 1926, was one of the last of the gender-bending female African American singers who made her mark on American music. Big Mama earned her nickname because of her tough attitude and heavy drinking, and she was more comfortable dressing in men's clothing. She had a powerful singing voice, best described as a menacing growl and thundering, that she belted out of her short, more than 300 pound heavy body. Her song *Hound Dog* mixed her unique Blues shouting style with the Southern rockabilly sound that was popular at the time, and it was her biggest hit. It was also a big hit for Elvis Presley who stylized it for a broader, whiter audience. He made a lot more money from the song's success than Big Mama ever did. Big Mama's talent was again overshadowed by a white artist's version of her song *Ball and Chain*. However, the version Janis Joplin did at the famous Monterey Jazz Festival in 1967 did create more public interest in Thornton's music and led to her recording more commercially successful work. In 1984, the same year heavy drinking ended her life, Big Mama Thornton was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame. Big Mama's version of *Ball and Chain* was later recognized by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame on its list of "500 Songs that Shaped Rock and Roll." As with other queer Blues divas, few biographies mention her sexual preference directly.

The women discussed in this paper eventually ended their careers but continued to influence American music and culture. Most lost their fortunes, but their legacies remain rich.

Ma Rainey's hot career started to cool off with the introduction of talking movies. A few entertainers made the leap to Hollywood, and others went back to performing in vaudeville and minstrel shows. Not visually appealing enough for the big screen, Rainey retired in 1935 and died of heart disease in 1939. "Housekeeping" ("Ma Rainey: The Life and Music of "The Mother of the Blues".") was written as her profession on her Death Certificate. For a woman who was so famous and well-loved that she played to overflow crowds wherever she went and wealthy enough to buy her own tour bus with her name printed across the side, this dismissal of her talent and contribution to the Blues did her a great disservice that history has since corrected. All of her recordings have been re-issued on CD, she was honored with a United States postage stamp, and her home in Georgia was turned into a Blues Museum. She inspired many singers in her lifetime and continues to do so today. Louis Armstrong, the famous singer, trumpeter, orchestra leader, and all-around Jazz artist, was especially influenced by Rainey, and mimicked her facial expressions, gestures, and her voice in his performances. The noted playwright August Wilson was so inspired by Ma Rainey's life and career that he wrote "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," a celebrated musical that chronicles the life and music of the singer. It has played on Broadway with excellent reviews. "White folks just don't understand about the blues," Ma's character tells the audience in the play. "They don't understand that it's life's way of talkin'. You don't sing to feel better – you sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life" ("Ma Rainey: The Life and Music of "The Mother of the Blues".").

The Great Depression and increased popularity of radio signaled the end of Bessie Smith's career as both made it difficult for record companies to sell records, and people had little money to spend on luxuries like decadent nightlife and concert tickets. Because she was such a versatile performer, Smith was able to revive her career by adapting her look and singing style to fit the new Swing music that was in vogue. She was on the verge of a successful comeback when she died in a car accident in 1937. The assumption is that she bled to death because the ambulance carrying her injured body was turned away from an all-white hospital in Mississippi. History has been kinder to Ms. Smith, however, and she has been awarded a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, a United States postage stamp, and her *Downhearted Blues* was chosen as one of the Songs of the Century by the National Endowment for the Arts and placed in the Grammy Hall of Fame and on the National Recording Preservation Board by the Library of Congress. She influenced many female singers over the decades including Billie Holiday, Aretha Franklin, and Janis Joplin. Joplin, who purchased Smith's headstone, spoke of her role model poetically by saying "She showed me the air and taught me how to fill it" (Rockhall). Bessie Smith's recordings are still popular today.

Gladys Bentley moved to California and sang in gay clubs as the Harlem Renaissance was declining. The Los Angeles police forced clubs to get permits to allow her to perform in men's clothing, and Bentley's popularity diminished. By the early 1950's, she was targeted for her open lesbianism and interracial relationships by the House Un-American Activities Committee. The "McCarthy witch hunts," (Queer Cultural Center) while primarily targeting suspected communists, were especially cruel to blacks and homosexuals, and many gay people had their lives and reputations ruined as a result of their interrogations. It is ironic that the three

architects of this governmental crackdown have been revealed to have had queer tendencies themselves. J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI, was discovered to be a cross-dresser; Joseph McCarthy, a Senator from Wisconsin, who was rumored to have been gay or bi-sexual himself, was a paranoid fanatic who was a severe alcoholic and heroin addict; and Roy Cohn, a lawyer who was McCarthy's chief counsel and adviser/confidante in the 1970's and 80's to now President Donald Trump, was a closeted homosexual who died of AIDS.

In order to save herself and her career from total ruin, Gladys Bentley started wearing dresses, took the lewd references out of her act, and gave an interview stating that she had reverted to heterosexuality by taking female hormone supplements. She said about finally living a so-called normal life that she "was finally at peace after a hell as terrible as dope addiction." (Queer Cultural Center) Bentley eventually did marry a man and then "became a devout Christian" (Ring 2017). A Chicago newspaper interview a few years later revealed that Gladys was probably true to her own nature all along when she was asked about photos on her dresser. "That's my husband (pointing to the male) and that's my wife" was her honest response (Ring 2017). Bentley died from a flu outbreak in 1960 at the age of 52 just before she was able to complete her religious training and be ordained as a minister.

Needless to say, Lucille Bogan/Bessie Jackson's record company did not renew her contract after her raunchy version of *Shave 'Em Dry Blues* was published. Bogan stopped recording but stayed in the music business by continuing to write songs and managing her son's band until her death from coronary artery disease in 1948. B.B. King was inspired to record his own hit version of *Sweet Black Angel*, leaving out the controversial word "Black" and replacing it with "Little" to give it more universal appeal. Her songs continue to be recorded by various

lesbian (and mainstream) artists including Saffire: The Uppity Blues Women and Asylum Street Spankers, and she is considered the inspiration for many of Rap music's more controversial artists like 2 Live Crew, Ludacris, and others who write and perform jaw-dropping, hardcore lyrics.

Alberta Hunter stopped singing after her mother's death and, by lying about her age by making herself twelve years younger, became a nurse in 1957 "to help humanity" (Wilson 1984). She started singing the Blues again after she reached the mandatory nursing retirement age of 70 (when she was actually 82). Hunter headlined at the Manhattan Jazz club The Cookery for as long as she still had all of her teeth so that she would not whistle into the microphone. She continued to completely thrill her audiences until a year before her death at the age of 89. Her New York Times obituary does not mention her sexuality.

Ethel Waters, despite her best attempts at self-sabotage with her volcanic anger, continued to have a very diverse career throughout her life. Her flair for the dramatic earned her a Best Supporting Actress nomination at the Academy Awards for her role as a maid in the 1949 movie "Pinky." She was nominated for the same award a second time a year later for a similar role in the movie "A Member of the Wedding." Waters won the New York Drama Critics Award for Best Actress when "A Member of the Wedding" played on Broadway. Although she played a typical role for African American actresses at the time, her performance transcended stereotype by "delivering a nuanced performance that elevated the character to a high level of complexity and humanity" ("Ethel Waters."). She transitioned to television and earned the first-ever Primetime Emmy Award nomination for an African American actress in a dramatic role. Waters continued to sing with evangelist Billy Graham's traveling revivals until her death in 1977.

These amazingly brave women, through their many talents, but especially their Blues music, promoted an African American feminism that spoke of their emotional strength and resilience. They had a “stubborn insistence on liberty” (Powers 2017) and bucked social norms by celebrating their bi- and homosexuality in pre-Stonewall America. They were recognized around the world for their artistry and influence. The filmmaker Robert Philipson, who directed a short documentary about these divas, remarked that “You certainly never saw (anything like them) in any other part of American culture” (Hix 2013). They transcended the boundaries of “race music” (Hix 2013) in their heyday, and they continue to cross racial and social boundaries in their continuing influence today. It has been a true pleasure learning about their life, art, and legacy, and I am grateful to be able to share them with you.

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