

Bisexuality in the Blues: the legacy of womens' sexual and musical liberation

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The macro-antiphonal concept,¹ which is intrinsically important to Black American music, asserts that the blues is both a product of and catalyst for the black liberation movement in the United States of America: its music is consistently challenging and transgressive.² The blues is the art of an oppressed people, and the music expresses a people's response to such a political condition; it is not simply music for music's sake, as its origin is within the slave trade and its development reflects the tensions and dynamics of the hybridization process between African and American musics.³ Furthermore, the blues is a black male dominated art form, as the majority of pioneering blues singers and musicians have been black males; few black women became involved in the blues, and those who did were powerful figures that embraced the social and political power of the blues. Expressions of bisexuality within the blues are reflective of blues womens' personal, social and political power.

Angela Davis cites that blues women are sexually aware and independent, often known as "wild women". Bisexuality in the blues is crucial because these women did not subvert their sexualities in their actions and in their music. Their blues is about ownership and redemption of their "sins" - it is almost a confessional admission, except for the fact that they are not repenting. Rather, these women are simply opening up about their sexual nature.⁴ Bessie Jackson's *BD Women* unapologetically addresses the characteristic looks and actions of bull dyke women. Its lyrics pass no judgement upon these women, who walk, drink, and work like men.⁵

The vocal characteristics of blues singing are very distinct: the sensuality of the vocal tone is expressed in microtonality, pitch bends, imitation of instruments (ie-scatting) evokes a gospel feel; the singers are singing about something that is spiritual to them. In the history of Western music, especially opera, women are generally portrayed as damsels in distress in vocal quality and in subject matter,⁶ but blues women are beacons of strength and power, defying the female stereotype. They are women that cannot be tamed, and it shows itself in both their voices and in the subject matter of which they sing. One example of this is Gladys Bentley, a blues singer who was a key singer in the Harlem Renaissance. Bentley lived as an out lesbian until the 1950s, when

she claimed her homosexuality was fixed by a series of medical treatments and she married a man. In her *Worried Blues*, Bentley alternates between singing the lyrics and scatting freely in a call and response fashion. In this case her scatting replaces the traditional instrumental response to each line as she playfully vocalizes a response to each lyric. *Worried Blues* touches upon the subject of men mistreating their women; Bentley's take upon the subject is lighthearted as she concludes "I don't want no man that I got to give my money to".⁷ The vocalise adds an air of freedom to the lyrics; the listener is able to perceive the singer as a confident, empowered woman who is able to free herself from a man who does not treat her as he should.

The women of the blues generally have low, loud voices with power to them. All of these are attributes that are generally seen in male voices. Classical music exalts the higher, clear bell-like soprano voices; in opera, the star is usually the soprano, who is often given the role of the sex object. Likewise, the lower female voice types are reserved for the 'witches, bitches, and britches': unsexualized roles such as old women, young boys (trouser roles), and evil women. The opposite occurs in the blues: these women are sexually open and aware and have low voices. Thus, the gender binary begins to be blurred with the advent of women in the blues as they are using their masculine qualities in conjunction with their sexuality. Their vocal qualities are coupled with a more sensual way of singing, including orgasmic melismas and pitch bends.

Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey had as much to do with women's liberation as they had to do with black liberation, and their music reflected as such. Most of their songs were about overcoming hardship and soul redemption, just as male blues was.⁸ There is no damsel in distress phenomenon in the blues; when singing about men mistreating them, the proactive approach is taken rather than assuming a damsel in distress role. One prime example of this is Bessie Smith's *Safety Mamma*, which narrates the story of a no good man and what he's done to the singer. He's taken advantage of her youth and beauty and left her; in the refrain, Smith outlines a way to treat such a man that includes making him wash and iron and telling the neighbors he's lost his mind.⁹ These lyrics coupled with Smith's catchy tune and distinct voice makes for an anthem for mistreated women to live by. It is a way to show women that it's possible to overcome such hardship.

In the blues, bisexuality is explicitly addressed and expressed. Two examples of this are Bessie Jackson's *BD women* and Ma Rainey's *Prove it on Me*.¹⁰ These

songs are not coded and the issue is not skirted. In *BD Women*, Jackson sings about bull dyke women who walk, drink, and work like men. *Prove it on Me* sings about talking to women like a man would. The masculine qualities of queer women are extolled and always addressed. It is celebrated that the bull dyke women act like men so they don't need men, and that Rainey can talk to women like a man can. Masculinity is still associated with strength; it is still a patriarchal society, and these women are evoking images of strength, independence and power by highlighting the masculinity of lesbianism. These women prove themselves to be capable of taking the traditional male role in lesbian relationships. The idea that women should be able to take care of each other challenges the patriarchal model - whether lesbian or not, it shows that women are capable of power and strength and of being the head of a home the way a man traditionally is. These women are able to use the subversion of the patriarchal model to defy it.

Crossdressing is also subversive. Whether intended or not, clothing is political and sends a message to those around you. To crossdress is to maintain one's own biological gender while wearing clothing that is associated with the opposite gender. It is a phenomenon that has become quite commonplace in the queer communities (ie: drag queens, butch women, etc.) as a source of gender parody, exhibitionism of sexual orientation, and defiance of gender stereotyping. Bessie Jackson's *BD Women* is a cornerstone of bisexuality in blues music because it not only addresses lesbianism but also directly deals with crossdressing. Especially in the case of women, crossdressing desexualizes oneself to the opposite sex, by bringing one's appearance close to that of the opposite sex. The term *bull dyke* is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as (often disparaging) an aggressively masculine lesbian.¹¹ The term is reserved for lesbians who crossdress, while feminine lesbians are exempt from this and often exalted by the patriarchy because they are still sexually objectifiable in their appearance. The bull dyke is a threat to the patriarchy because she looks like a man and has the ability to take the man's place, both sexually and in society. Likewise, the high-voiced female is generally exalted in the history of Western music because it is characteristically unmasculine in sound and nature. Women who are sopranos produce a clear, unnaturally high, overtone-rich sound that conjures what has become a patriarchal ideal of femininity in Western music.

Thus, expressions of bisexuality within the blues are reflective of blues womens' personal, social and political power. The women of the blues create

music that is indicative of their strength and power, and their legacies are as important to the women and black liberation movements as they are to the history of black American music.

Footnotes:

1. The macro-antiphonal concept is defined as call and response on a larger level within music. This concept exists within black music on a philosophical level as well as a literal musical level.

2. Ho, Fred. "What Makes Music Political and How it Can Be," lecture, Left Forum, New York, NY.

3. <http://historicaltextarchive.com/sections.php?action=read&artid=410>

4. Davis, Angela, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (Random House, New York, 1999)

5. "Lesbian Blues". Narrated by Mike Rugel. *Uncensored History of the Blues*, September 22, 2005.

<http://uncensoredhistoryoftheblues.purplebeech.com/2005/09/show-3-lesbian-blues.html>

6. Clement, Catherine. *Opera or the Undoing of Women* (IB Tauris Publishers, London, 1997)

7. "Lesbian Blues". Narrated by Mike Rugel. *Uncensored History of the Blues*, September 22, 2005.

<http://uncensoredhistoryoftheblues.purplebeech.com/2005/09/show-3-lesbian-blues.html>

8. Davis, Angela. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (Random House, New York, 1999)

9. Smith, Bessie. *Bessie Smith: Empress of the Blues* (Empress Music Inc, New York, 1932)

10. "Lesbian Blues". Narrated by Mike Rugel. *Uncensored History of the Blues*, September 22, 2005.

<http://uncensoredhistoryoftheblues.purplebeech.com/2005/09/show-3-lesbian-blues.html>

11. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bull%20dyke>

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Discography:

Bessie Smith, *Greatest Hits*, (c) 2005 Acrobat Music Limited, B001V75CX6.

Gladys Bentley, *Archive of American Popular Music 1893-1946*, (c) 2010 Master Classics Records, B003F9HSA8

Lucille Bogan, *Southern Blues 2*, (c) 1999 by Exceed, B004814L0W

Ma Rainey, *Ma Rainey*, (c) 2007, 1992 by Fantasy Records, B000UBMZV6

