



Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday

By Angela Y. Davis

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From one of this country's most important intellectuals comes a brilliant analysis of the blues tradition that examines the careers of three crucial black women blues singers through a feminist lens. Angela Davis provides the historical, social, and political contexts with which to reinterpret the performances and lyrics of Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday as powerful articulations of an alternative consciousness profoundly at odds with mainstream American culture.

The works of Rainey, Smith, and Holiday have been largely misunderstood by critics. Overlooked, Davis shows, has been the way their candor and bravado laid the groundwork for an aesthetic that allowed for the celebration of social, moral, and sexual values outside the constraints imposed by middle-class respectability. Through meticulous transcriptions of all the extant lyrics of Rainey and Smith—published here in their entirety for the first time—Davis demonstrates how the roots of the blues extend beyond a musical tradition to serve as a consciousness-raising vehicle for American social memory. A stunning, indispensable contribution to American history, as boldly insightful as the women Davis praises, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* is a triumph.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

The female blues singers of the 1920s, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, and Bessie Smith, not only invented a musical genre, but they also became models of how African American women could become economically independent in a culture that had not previously allowed it. Both Smith and Rainey composed, arranged, and managed their own road bands. Angela Y. Davis's study emphasizes the impact that these singers, and later Billie Holiday, had on the poor and working-class communities from which they came. The artists addressed radical subjects such as physical and economic abuse, race relations, and female sexual power, including lesbianism. Ma Rainey was well known as a lover of women as well as men, and her song "Prove It on Me" describes a butch woman who dresses like a man and dates women. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* places the fluid sexuality of these women within a larger context of African American artists' attempts to subvert and recreate America.

From Publishers Weekly

In her provocative book, Davis, the well-known sixties radical, professor and author (Women, Culture, and Politics; Women, Race, and Class) finds, in the work of three pivotal artists of the blues and jazz era, "rich terrain for examining a historical feminist consciousness that reflected the lives of working-class black communities." Through her close readings of their lyrics, which she transcribed (and presents as the book's second half), Davis explores the meanings behind the performances of Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith. Toppling the prevailing image of the tragic blues woman, she finds that the songs don't portray the desolate and deserted woman; rather, "the most frequent stance assumed by the women in these songs is independence and assertiveness?indeed defiance?bordering on and sometimes erupting into violence." She also offers ample evidence to dispute claims that women's blues were personal, not political, arguing that their songs created consciousness by naming the issues. Her readings of Billie Holiday's lyrics are less successful, perhaps because it is difficult to capture in words Holiday's subversive renderings of popular love songs. Still, Davis's book should be read by both scholars and music aficionados for its expressive reading of these singers' complex works. 8 pages of b&w photos.

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From Library Journal

In this fascinating exploration, feminist scholar and social historian Davis reveals how these women defied the dominant culture by incorporating a critical social consciousness into their music. Rainey established the blues as women's music, and Smith was the most successful blues singer of her time. Davis shows how their songs expressed independence and assertiveness, challenged ideas of gender-based inferiority, and covered topics such as domestic abuse, prostitution, work, and jail in such a way as to create a social history of African Americans. Davis sees these women's expression of these issues as a precursor to the feminist consciousness-raising found several decades later. While Holiday was not primarily a blues singer, Davis examines the social implications of her ability to transform inconsequential love songs into complex emotional explorations. This engaging book is of profound interest to all music, women's studies, and African American history collections. Highly recommended.?Michael Colby, Univ. of California Libs., Davis

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Users Review

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