

# Introduction

In the introduction to their book, *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*, Leslie Dunn and Nancy Jones stated that the meanings of songs and the voices that sing them “cannot be recovered without reconstructing the contexts of their hearing” (Dunn & Jones, 1994, 2). While their focus was specifically on women singers, the same principal holds for men as well. In the study of blues in the 1920s, women artists are generally more visible and thus seen as more important than their contemporary male counterparts; while this point is true on many levels, male performers of blues and African American popular music of the 1900–1935 era were great influences as well.

The definition of the blues of this period is somewhat flexible. While sometimes called “Classic Female Blues” to limit the style to the careers (and recordings) of the great blues women of the 1920s, the era can in fact be seen to begin with the development of the Black entertainment industry in the late nineteenth century and continuing through the jazz-influenced swing and jump blues of the 1930s (the so-called Bluebird Sound in honor of the company that issued recordings of many classic performers of the genre). From the late 1910s until the end of the period, blues and jazz were closely associated and mutually influential in terms of style, sound, and even instrumentation. The common strain with most of the blues repertoire and performance styles discussed here is that they were developed on the stages of the Black entertainment circuits of the first twenty years of the twentieth century.

In its earliest days, the music that has come to be known as blues was an amalgam of folk songs, ragtime, and popular Tin Pan Alley fare, including the subgenre of “coon songs,” which became popular in the 1890s and early 1900s, but can be seen to have originated in the White

minstrel tradition predating the Civil War. A complicated admixture of racial and gender stereotypes was interpreted through the musical prism of the popular syncopations of ragtime and a highly developed professional apparatus that was almost unbelievably accelerated by the travels of Black entertainment troupes, which lead to the adoption of the folk form that coalesced into the blues. The appearance of the rural Black folk music tradition that gave its feeling and musical expression to the blues structure, codified by sheet music publications and recordings beginning in the mid-1910s, was a happenstance that, in turn, influenced virtually all American popular music for the next hundred years.

When interviewed by folklorist John Wesley Work III in 1929, Ma Rainey (“The Mother of the Blues”) claimed to have been the first professional entertainer to sing blues on stage after hearing the style for the first time in 1902 (Abbott & Seroff, 2017, 162). This early date does not seem likely, because press notices of Rainey’s performances do not mention her singing anything other than standard popular fare before 1913, and the first publications of blues songs dated from slightly later (Abbott & Seroff, 2017, 170). Prior to that, Rainey occasionally had been advertised as a “coon shouter,” singing that repertoire of songs, which as Abbot and Seroff have pointed out, share many characteristics with popular blues of the 1920s: humor, perspective, language, feeling, and occasionally even structure.

The popular concept of the blues as a pure folk form is a simplification of little importance to what became known as “Classic Blues.” Sometimes also called “Vaudeville Blues,” the style codified during the 1910s when Tin Pan Alley published numerous songs with the word *blues* in the title and the use of what came to be known as traditional blues lyrics, occasionally utilizing Black dialect. These songs were performed both by Black and White performers in highly professional settings: vaudeville theaters, cabarets, tent shows, and even circuses as part of larger entertainment companies presenting comedians, dancers, dramatic sketches, animal acts, and much more. Peter Muir calls this style “popular blues” and separates it from folk blues, largely due to transmission: written music for popular blues and oral music for folk blues. While this is a neat distinction, many Black singers of the 1920s clearly had feet in both camps (Muir, 2010, 3).

My own connection to the blues comes as a performer, historian, and academic who values the power of the music not only for what it represents but as a personal mode of expression. While as a White

middle-class person raised in New England I cannot claim the direct experience of blues culture, I can value it for its endless capacity for reinvention and appreciate it for its central location in American culture, both looking back and forward. The recent focus on critical race theory (CRT) across many disciplines makes application to Classic Blues and the Black entertainment world before 1935 at once both illuminating and essential. Two particular elements of the CRT construct are of particular relevance to the study of African American vernacular music of this period.

First is the idea of “intersectional theory,” which was developed by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 as a way of identifying and exploring the complex overlapping of gender, race, class, sexuality, and many other identifiers. Through this theoretical lens, a performer like Ma Rainey must be simultaneously heard/seen as a woman, an African American, an entertainer, a southerner, and possibly an individual who was sexually fluid, combination of which both greatly enhanced and complicated the narrative.

The second is the concept of “storytelling” as a means to unlock the lived experiences of musicians and entertainers. Very few contemporary interviews were done with participants in the Black music tradition prior to the Swing Era (1935–1945), and only a handful of film appearances (mostly silent) exist before this as well. The two sources of consistent documentation of these performers are commercial recordings that allow us to hear some of the most significant voices of the period (sometimes performing their own original material) and contemporary press reports and reviews. While the vast majority of these records were produced by White-owned companies primarily concerned with sales figures, enough echoes (however dim) of the on-stage and touring experiences of Bert Williams, George Walker, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and W. C. Handy emerge to allow for interpretation and conclusions to be drawn. According to Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy (2005), “Tribal Critical Race Theory . . . honors stories and oral knowledge as real and legitimate forms of data and ways of being. Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory.” He further points out that these stories (which are, in essence, what many of the blues songs and show tunes of the period consist of) “are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being” (15).

Any historian embarking on an overview project is necessarily standing on the shoulders of giants. My research would have been much more difficult and in many ways utterly impossible had it not been for the work

of many researchers and enthusiasts who came before me, beginning with the interviews conducted in the 1940s and 1950s by William Russell, Len Kunstadt, and Derrick Stewart Baxter. These interviews have proved invaluable for preserving the stories and voices of participants in the 1910s and 1920s Black entertainment scene. This research and investigation took on professional proportions by the 1960s, at which point periodicals such as *Storyville* and *Living Blues* aimed at jazz and blues audiences began publication with intrepid volunteer staffs fanning out over the entire United States and Europe to find more interview subjects. Book-length studies like Walter C. Allen's *Hendersonia* and Chris Albertson's *Bessie* sought to contextualize this plethora of information, while discographies by Brian Rust and, later, Dixon, Goodrich, and Rye identified thousands of recordings done during the period.

By the 1990s, even more in-depth work was being done. The extraordinary documentary work by Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff began with a series of articles and extended to three books (so far) that developed from a close reading of contemporary Black newspapers, creating layers of detail previously unknown. This was combined with a truly monumental CD reissue project by the Austrian Johnny Parth, who started Document Records in 1985, which by 2000 had released over a thousand CDs of blues, gospel, and African American entertainment and roots music recorded before 1950. These resources, plus the many jazz reissue projects, have made available virtually all recordings made during the 1910s and 1920s easily available and accessible on YouTube as well as streaming platforms.

I have chosen to divide the singers of this period into three categories. First is the "Cabaret Blues" style, which was the first to be recorded, beginning with Mamie Smith in 1920. The singers I include in this category were active primarily in cabarets, nightclubs, and smaller entertainment venues in the North during the late 1910s. Many (Mamie Smith, Ethel Waters, Mary Stafford) were born in the North or Midwest, as well, and did not bring a traditional southern sensibility to their performances. Others (Alberta Hunter and Lucille Hegamin) were born in the South but largely raised in Chicago.

The second category is "Vaudeville Blues." These singers began to appear on record by 1923, and were led by the twin epigones of the era: Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey. For the most part, these singers had been raised in the South and had a great deal of exposure to southern folk music, including early blues. They were active performers on the Black

vaudeville, tent show, and even minstrel circuits, and were often (unlike the Cabaret Blues singers) considered to be stars of the industry before they began recording, although some (Ida Cox and Rosa Henderson) became famous because of their recordings. The distinguishing factor uniting these performers is their professionalism and long-term stage experience, which allowed them to work well in the high-pressure atmosphere of the recording industry, which often required them to learn songs on the spot and create spontaneous performances.

The third category (“Down-home Blues”) begins to emerge around 1925 and gradually takes over the industry, launching the various blues styles of the 1930s and beyond. This category was driven in large part by economics and the need to present new material to the record-buying public. Almost exclusively southern, these singers typically brought their own original material (a cost-saving method, meaning record companies did not need to pay copyright fees) and worked either alone or in smaller combinations. Female singers (Victoria Spivey, Sippie Wallace, and Luella Miller) and males (Blind Lemon Jefferson, Papa Charlie Jackson, and Blind Blake) usually did not have as much professional stage experience as their vaudeville counterparts and were accustomed to making music in “temporary” entertainment venues such as at house parties and on street corners. Nevertheless, performers such as Jefferson and Blake became some of the most popular and widely recorded stars of the period.

Some performers do not fit neatly into any single category. Trixie Smith recorded extensively during the first period (where I have discussed her, largely on the basis of her influence being felt more strongly there), but is much more in line with the vaudeville singers. Eva Taylor made many records during the first period, but her partnership with Clarence Williams (her husband) made her far more influential during the second. Papa Charlie Jackson is the first successful recording artist of the Down-home period, but he (virtually alone among those performers) had extensive stage experience in tent and medicine shows.

I have decided to deal with the singers in the individual sections in the order of their first recording session, except for a general listing of “other singers” whose influence was limited due to their limited recordings, who I address at the end of the chapters.