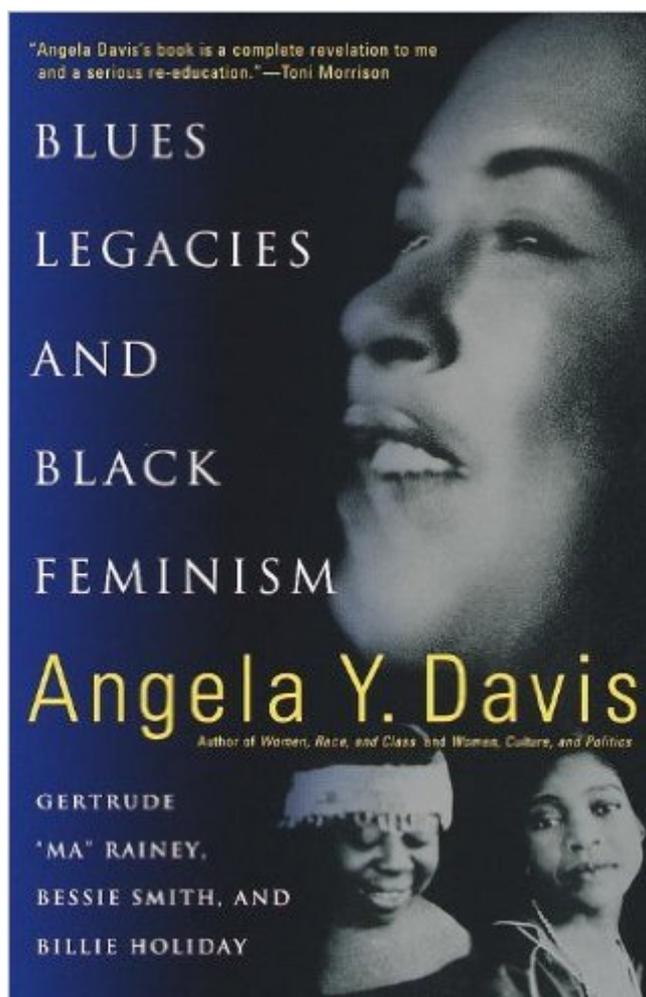


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# Blues Legacies And Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, And Billie Holiday



## Synopsis

Examines how Black female blues singers expressed a working class, feminist perspective.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Davis work is a powerful re-reading of Blues women, and firmly places them in the center, rather than the margin, of Black oppositional and autonomous culture discourse. The book is mostly devoted to the work of Gertrude Rainey and Bessie Smith, but there are important sections devoted to Billie Holiday as well. In each case, the Davis argues for a more complete contextual understanding of Blues women music as introducing gender issues, breaking discursive taboos, and forging meaning within the context of an imagined community of Black women's lives. To begin with, Davis convincingly argues that Blues women were on the vanguard in breaking down taboos concerning domestic violence and male subjugation, as many Blues songs concerned these matters. Davis uses powerful works such as "Rough and Tumble Blues," "See See Rider Blues," and "Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair," to demonstrate that Blues women were willing to engage in oppositional, if allegorical, violence in the service of personal autonomy. Even man songs that seem to demonstrate acquiescence, even masochism, in the face of male abuse can be seen to have an ironic, subversive, or didactic quality that belies a simplistic surface reading. Davis also takes on the common notion that Blues music doesn't include social protest, an interpretation that has been pushed by white commentators, such as Samuel Charters, and black commentators, such as Albert Murray. Davis argues that Blues music inherits from Slave musical culture a coded approach to naming and resistance that demands more than a surface analysis of the lyrics, and takes into

account the role of music as a lyrical interlocuter. Focusing on tunes such as "Backwater Blues" and "Washwoman's Blues," Davis almost always effectively demonstrates that coded protest is still protest, and that women's blues historically anticipated and grounded mass movements in the areas of civil rights and feminism, while remaining linked with West African hermeneutic structure of naming and interpretation, such as "nommo." In terms of Religious content, Davis forcefully recounts how women reconfigured a secular existential (or even "Devil's") music as prayer itself, magically and aesthetically conjured to exorcise emotions such as "the blues." At the same time, she harshly criticizes the Black church for adopting Christian dualisms concerning the moral status of body and spirit, which she sees as sexualized forms of racism and sexism--- since both blacks and women have been semiotically linked with earthiness and body as opposed to spirit by white male elites. Celebratory Sexuality, on the other hand, has always, according to Davis, been an oppositional aspect of black working-class consciousness. This extends beyond sexuality to an affirmation of Black folk religious life (such as Hoodoo) and crossing of class boundaries in the Blues, which Davis contends is a major reason Blues music was ignored and even distanced by Black elites during the Harlem Renaissance. Davis's discussion of Billie Holiday is short (two chapters) but powerful, in which she argues that Holiday subversively appropriated the saccharine Tin Pan Alley love song format she was given as Slaves would have appropriated the English language upon their arrival in the North Americas. Holiday worked little in the formal Blues, but was nonetheless grounded in the Blues idiom, from which she drew inspiration, and a subversive presentation of white romantic life to Black audiences. In this vein, such songs as "Strange Fruit" fit more coherently, and the ironic (and yet utopian) edge in her voice professes to the truth of Black women's lives, even in ways that on the surface seem to be feministically regressive. There are isolated examples where Davis is less successful than at other times, but on the whole, her argumentation is strong and fearless, and her analogical and narrative analysis of the music along with lyrics adds, rather than detracts, from her argument.

If you expect to read a traditional biography you may be disappointed. The lives of the blues women and their political messages behind their songs are discussed in one another's light. This works very well as blues is a folk music which tells many things about the black experience and most singers are song writers themselves. The section about Billie Holiday and her song Strange Fruit is one of the rare approaches to Lady Day as an artist who gave a very important political messages about racism. In other biographies Billie Holiday is always portrayed as a victim rather than a person who had an important political message. I believe this very style of her portrayal could

be discussed in a feminist context and that's what Angela Davies did in this book with her vast knowledge and experience in black politics and gender issues. Some people criticize the book for being overtly political. However, I see no other way of analyzing the blues without its political context. The transcriptions of the songs also gives a documentary value to this book. It has been a great reference for my research in this field. I wish I can get in touch with Angela Davies one day and discuss her about the research she has done while preparing this book.

The early dismissive reviewers on this site have missed the most useful point of Davis's book. When she talks about "proto-feminist consciousness" she means that the lives and music of Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday paved the way for modern feminism. As working-class black women, these singers were utterly alienated from the "hearth and home" that defined the "official version" of (white) woman's identity. Yet were they not still women? They broke all of the rules at the intersection of domesticity and Jim Crow: They worked outside the home, they traveled extensively, they chose their lovers, they were artists, and they were band-leaders. None of these positions fit neatly within the prevailing attitudes about woman's place. So, before the 1970s feminist movements explored these same topics (sexuality, gender roles, working women), Rainey and Smith had lived and sung about it. Whereas white feminists find white women's literature a valuable place to search for roots of feminism, Davis and other scholars of black American culture (in which the struggle for literacy has still not been won) have found music to be a rich source of personal and communal histories and social commentary. So music is where she searches to find articulations of women who already lived identities in conflict with the prevailing notions of femininity. No one need fear Davis's use of the term feminist or her use of race and class to analyze these women's music. Race, class, and gender undoubtedly determined the possibilities for these women's lives. Davis draws upon existing definitions of the blues and also expands the definition to include the "proto-feminist consciousness" of black women. Davis's discussion of the blues idiom is comprehensive. Each blues motif is carefully examined for the cultural work it does when sung by men and by women. Traveling and choosing lovers are, to Davis, reflective of the new mobility and autonomy blacks experienced from Reconstruction on. Davis also contrasts the blues' sometimes individualistic emphasis with the communal performance of spirituals. When Davis describes the blues aesthetic of Rainey and Smith, she shows their convergence with and divergence from that of black male blues singers. With this strategy, she makes it impossible to talk about the blues again without including the particular way that black women participate(d) in the blues. The only part of the book that did not convince me was her section on Billie Holiday. Although I believe that Holiday was

able to work against the often demeaning lyrics she promoted for Tin Pan Alley hacks, I find it harder to imagine Davis's point of view of Holiday's music as proto-feminist. In book format, one does not have Holiday's recordings handy to compare Davis's interpretations of her pronunciation and shading with Holiday's recorded voice. With Smith and Rainey, however, the lyrics are closely associated with the message, and Davis is better able to prove her claim. I am also not persuaded that Holiday (evaluated by her music) quite belongs in the category blueswoman. The few 12-bar blues she sang certainly fall in the tradition of Rainey and Smith. "Fine and Mellow" describes a great lover whom she'll leave nonetheless if he doesn't treat her right. "Billie's Blues" ends with the assertion that "[I'm] everything a good man needs!" However, I think that, although Holiday is to Northern jazz what Rainey and Smith were to the migration-born blues, Dinah Washington might have made a better musical comparison with Rainey and Smith. A few claims in the Holiday section prevent this otherwise flawless book from gaining five stars. A quick mention of Davis's compilation of the previously unwritten lyrics to Rainey's and Smith's recordings: Her undertaking will provide very useful to future singers and jazz or blues critics. It is difficult to hear the lyrics on these early recordings, thus she makes a couple of mistakes. I do take issue with her spelling; she writes what Rainey and Smith sang in Black English/Ebonics in Standard English. She sometimes ruins the original sense AND sound of the lyrics when she translates them into academically acceptable language. Still, an extremely important undertaking, despite the times she misheard and miswrote the lyrics. (She admits the possibility of her mishearing the songs in her preface.) Again, Davis's analysis of Rainey and Smith must alter the way we think about the cultural significance of blues (and its outgrowth, jazz).

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