

jazz BLUES IS A WOMAN

by Rosetta Reitz

Last year, when I saw the "Black Broadway" concert at the Newport Jazz Festival I felt it was the best concert I'd ever attended. Hearing the old music, live that way, as part of theater entertainment was better than the best of recordings.

The parts that I loved, the parts that kept me clapping after others had stopped, were the superb women singers. I am writing a book about them so it was a double delight, hearing and *seeing* them sing those songs that I know intimately from records. My cheeks ached from smiling.

When Edith Wilson, Adelaide Hall and Nell Carter sang the historic songs, giving them live dimensions, keeping time with their bodies, using mischievous facial expressions to underline their meaning—it was simply—exhilarating. I couldn't get enough. The word *more* wouldn't leave my mind.

I've got this nutty thing with time and old songs. I don't even try to understand it. Although I know I'm in the here and now, the twenties songs take me back in time. When the songs are good and the artist makes them come alive, there is no time. Yet, they are for every time. A transcendence of time happens.

Edith Wilson's "He May Be Your Man But He Comes To See Me Sometimes" reflects today's attitudes as much as it did when it was written in 1922. Nell Carter's "I've Got A Feeling I'm Falling" brought back my past. My adrenalin began pumping.

I love the classic blues singers; they confronted their lives with unblinking candor, without deception. For years, their records nourished me. I gained sustenance from their female sensibility. I embraced their energy and it helped me through rough times. They didn't hide from sadness; they sang about it. They were not ashamed of being needy. When Bessie Smith sings "I Need A Little Sugar In My Bowl," she is not feeling inferior or unworthy; merely stating the fact of her life at that time.

These women fashioned an art from their everyday experience. That is what makes these legendary blues so compelling. And it is the only time in American history when women in blues reigned.

I am inspired by the way they feel about themselves, the way they celebrate themselves in

their songs. When Susie Edwards of Butterbeans & Susie sings "I Bake The Best Jelly-Roll In Town" or when Maggie Jones sings "There's No Sweeter Cabbabe In Town" or Lucille Bogan sings "My Sweet Patunia," they are openly expressing feelings about themselves and their sexuality that are uncommon in this culture. It is refreshing to hear these songs of self-affirmation.

The classic blues singers combined, sometimes in a single phrase, the old country blues and jazz with grace and ease.

The women singing in that concert remained with me. I couldn't think of anything else. I wondered why Adelaide Hall didn't sing "Creole Love Call" that had been listed on the program. I love that song, the way she sang in 1927 with Duke Ellington, using her voice as an instrument. Her early scat sounds are the bedrock other women have built on. If I produced a concert, I'd want her to sing that song.



Bessie Smith

Lil Armstrong



Blues is a Woman

Without knowing it, I began thinking about the kind of concert that would really please me, really satisfy me so that I wouldn't be left wanting more.

I let my fantasy wander and grow. It took me over as I formulated the best concert (for me) Newport could present. (I learned a lot about fantasy from the blues singers.

There is a literature of fantasy-type songs about how women would like life, rather than about how life is. No one has mentioned those fantasies in the histories. In this kind of song, the women spell out what they want. For example, when Sippie Wallace sings "A Man for Everyday In The Week" (with Louis Armstrong and her brother Hersal Thomas on piano, 1926—a perfect blend of singer, poetry and instrument), she is dealing with abandonment.

However, instead of add addressing the "dirty mistreater" she sings about how marvelously she is being served by various lovers. The butcher brings her meat, the coalman takes care of her heat, etc. She is telling the world she is desirable instead of moaning about the lost love. The implication is that he is a fool for having left her.

Many women I know have been conditioned to believe that everything is their fault. If a man leaves them, it was because they have done something wrong. Not these women, there was nothing wrong with them.

The world we live in is full of messages directing us to be "better." We are not good enough as we are, "buy this, do that." These messages killed one of the greatest blues singers of our time. Dinah Washington died at the age of 39 in 1963 from taking diet pills. She bought the culture's message that thin is right and fat is wrong. Oh, Goddess! had she only internalized these classic lines, she might still be with us today.

I'm a big fat mama, meat shakin on my bones,
When I shake, a skinny woman loses her home.

A few nights after the "Black Broadway" concert, I heard Koko Taylor who was singing in a club downtown. There she was, with all her energy and pride, belting out "I'm A Woman." When she sang the lines, "I'm an earthshaker; I'm the rushing wind," I got goose pimples. For the moment, at least, I too was an earthshaker. When she proclaimed "Everything's gonna be all right," I believed her. Yes, Koko Taylor would be in my concert too.

By this time, I was writing the details down. My perfect concert had become my work. I did not know yet how I would present it to George Wein, but since the idea was so compelling, I went with it. For two full weeks, I worked on it. It was an obsession. I played the records and keep changing my mind about which songs to include.

There were all kinds of problems to sort out. For example, I had a hard time with the idea of including Sippie Wallace's "I'm A Mighty Tight Woman," a

song for which she is famous. When I interviewed her for the Smithsonian Institution's Oral History Archive last year she referred to it as *her* song. But how could I, in 1980, include a song that says, "I come to you pretty pappa, fallin on my knees . . . I could be your sweet woman, also be your slave."

No, no matter how much I love Sippie, even though she's the last living true blues shouter from the Golden Era, we've had too much of the victim variety blues. After all, the blues covers all of life experience.



Sippie Wallace

My fantasy concert is going to be up-beat, fun, sensual, fresh, with more of the humor, irony and satire that make up the blues. I want Sippie to sing "Ya Gotta Know How." In that song she say, "When I loves my man, I makes him holler. Ya gotta know how, and I know how."

Sippie Wallace sings a traditional blues song, "Jelly Roll" and shimmies and shakes. An 81 year old woman being sexual is the idea I want to present.

One couldn't have a blues program without representing the greatest of them all, the Empress, Bessie Smith. Linda Hopkins did such a superb job in the show "Bessie & Me." I'll use her. There are

stories about Bessie, standing on the stage in her fringes and feathers in such command that the audience was mesmerized, so quiet that one could hear a pin drop. Some of her songs were gospel truth, without the benefit of gospel, but preached in the same way. I have imagined her singing from "Dirty No-Gooder's Blue" in her full rich voice, with the intensity of high drama.

Did you ever fall in love,
With a Man that was no good?

and getting the response: "Say It Sister; You Know It, Amen." That would be a song I would use as well as her "Young Woman's Blues," over fifty years old; it still echoes the feelings of many young women.

Ain't gonna marry, ain't gonna settle
down,
I'm a young woman, and ain't done
runnin round.

Neil Carter's singing in "Black Broadway" and in "Ain't Misbehavin" seemed like a reincarnation of the classic blues singers. I would have her do the feisty "Wild Women Don't Get The Blues" that Ida Cox did in 1924. She could also depict the first woman who put the blues on the stage at the turn of the century, Ma Rainey, and sing her famous song, "Trust No Man."

One of my favorite songs is "Sugar." Though not a twelve bar blues, many blues singers sang that song. It is, like many songs of the twenties, informed by the blues. Ethel Waters, when she was known as Sweet Mama Stringbean because she was long and tall and her voice was so sweet, sang "Sugar" and recorded it for Columbia's race label in 1926. Alberta Hunter and Fats Waller made a record of the song the next year with Fats playing the pipe organ. When he took an exquisite solo, she coaxes, "Pump that thing, Fats." More than a decade later, Billie Holiday made a beautiful recording of "Sugar" and so did Lee Wiley. I'll have Nell give it her interpretation.

As the fantasy developed, paying tribute to the women I admire, I thought of Lil Hardin Armstrong. She wasn't known as "the wizard of the keys" on Chicago's South Side, in the early twenties, for nothing. She beat out that four/four time, pounding her right leg all the while. This was before Louis came up from New Orleans.

Miss Lil was described as playing a lot of piano. She was also a composer, singer and arranger. Lil was King Joe Oliver's first choice. The Creole Jazz Band was the hottest one blowing in the country then. When Lil wasn't available King Joe used Bertha Gonsoulin, Lottie Taylor or Lil Holloway.

Of the scores of songs Lil Armstrong composed, there's a particularly charming one in which she sings, "I'm a brown gal, chocolate gal" with a vivacious delight in her self-celebration. Nell should do that one too.

Sharon Freeman, a fine young piano player (who plays French horn just as well) has the same strength and feel Lil had. She'll play the Lil tribute.

Beulah Bryant sings the frisky blues. The "Around The Clock Blues" is one song that many of the women sang. She must do that. Big Mama Thornton, I want her to sing "Hound Dog," which she recorded and made famous in 1952, three years before Elvis sang it.

We need to have great back-up musicians, the kind that know these blues, like Doc Cheatham, Vic Dickenson and Little Brother Montgomery. I'll leave that up to George Wein.

Now that I've used up the allotted program time, what'll I do about Billie Holiday? She certainly sang the blues. She's been so misrepresented; she'll need a very special tribute to make up for the way she's been treated. I'll figure that out another year but we'll mention her, Mamie Smith, Sara Martin, Lucille Hegamin, Rosa Henderson, Bertha "Chippie" Hill, Victoria Spivey, Memphis Minnie, Valaida Snow, Georgia White, Julia Lee, Big Maybelle and many more. I'll show their pictures, I'll project slides so they will be more clearly represented.

Carmen McRae should narrate. She's perfect. She too is a beautiful black singer. That's it, a concert acknowledging women's contribution to the history of American music.

Now to get it to George Wein. I called my old friend Ira Gitler, who is in contact with him and asked Ira if he'd hand my proposal to George. "Sure," he said. Many weeks later I got a call from the Festival office, "George Wein wants to meet with you."

"Does that mean he wants my concert?" I asked. "Yes," was the reply. Who says dreams don't come true?



Big Mama Thornton

Rosetta Reitz is the producer of the Women's Heritage Series on Rosetta Records. She is presently writing a book on The Blues Women.