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Fangfang Zhu

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**WILD WOMEN DO HAVE THE BLUES: THE IMAGERY OF VAUDEVILLE  
BLUESWOMEN AND THEIR INFLUENCES ON AUGUST WILSON AND  
SHERLEY ANNE WILLIAMS**

A Dissertation Presented

by

Fangfang Zhu

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2021

W.E.B Du Bois Department of African American Studies

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## **DEDICATION**

To Li, the man who stands behind me and backs me up

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation project is like a big river or a high mountain standing in front of me all these years. No matter what it takes me to finish it up at last, I still feel lucky that I never lose passion for it notwithstanding the moments of diffidence during this long journey. And in this acknowledgement, I'd like to express my gratitude to a lot of people who help paving the way to the final completion of my dissertation.

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ABSTRACT

**WILD WOMEN DO HAVE THE BLUES: THE IMAGERY OF VAUDEVILLE  
BLUESWOMEN AND THEIR INFLUENCES ON AUGUST WILSON AND  
SHERLEY ANNE WILLIAMS**

SEPTEMBER 2021

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Though the blues seems to be easily taken for granted as a “male-dominated” musical genre, it was blues women, especially female Vaudeville Blues singers who brought the blues into the recording industry, as well as to national attention. The 1920s, especially from 1920 to 1926, was the heyday for Vaudeville Blues and many blueswomen like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. Despite its coincidence with the Harlem Renaissance in time, the “blues aesthetics” of the Vaudeville Blues were not valued by most contemporary writers, who considered it as “low” and “dirty” as “the devil’s music,” with a few notable exceptions such as Langston Hughes and Sterling A. Brown. As the blues revival in the 1960s brought outdated blues sub-genres like Vaudeville Blues back to the stage, contemporary writers like August Wilson and Sherley Anne Williams also revitalized two prominent black female blues stars, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith, as an essential and inspiring resource and symbols they “recreate” in their literary writings in the 1970s and 1980s. This dissertation project aims to demonstrate the

significant and interesting interact between the Vaudeville Blues and literary works of Wilson and Williams, which are written nearly 40 to 50 years after the recession of the Vaudeville Blues but still reveal a strong influence of vaudeville blueswomen. This research engages multiple interdisciplinary "creative engines"— Vaudeville Blues songs, their advertisements, and literature including both drama and poetry, as well as taking singers, writers, advertisement copywriters, readers, and audience into consideration.

Via a synthesizing analysis of representative Vaudeville Blues songs in relation to the affiliated advertisements posted by recording labels in a major black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, in the 1920s, this dissertation project seeks to illustrate how the image of “wild” black women is presented, or performed in an ambivalent but contested space created by contending social, political, economic, and cultural forces in the race record industry. Constrained by racist and sexist gaze, such presentations and performances of “wild” black women still seize rare chances to invite conscious feminist interpretations, as their “wildness” voices out female independency, assertion, and agency even in pain and sufferings. Under the influence of such “wild” imagery created by Vaudeville Blueswomen, Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith in particular, August Wilson, playwright, and Sherley Anne Williams, poet, and novelist, both carry on the tradition of characterizing “wild women” but also diverge into two different destinations while engaging their individual artistic instincts in their works.

Adapting five songs by the real Ma Rainey as the basis of characterization, Wilson remolds a “wild” “Ma Rainey” via his fictional incarnation in the play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1982), who asserts her temporary and confined power in a sophisticated and shrewd fashion to defend her sexual subjectivity and musical integrity, within the

boundaries of racist and sexist oppression and exploration in the recording industry. In contrast, Williams adapts the title, the theme, structure, language, idioms from Bessie Smith's song "Any Woman's Blues" and renders them interpretatively into her poem "Any Woman's Blues," to manifest the "wild" mindset of modern black women on the imperfections of relationship, such as loneliness, interwoven with senses of identity and belonging. The outstanding literary contributions of Wilson and Williams combining the Vaudeville Blues and literary works mark another vital endeavor of writing orature into literature. In this sense, this interdisciplinary synthesis would hopefully reinforce the necessity of researches on the intersection between music and literature which responds to the call of "a new tradition built on a synthesis of black oral traditions and Western literate form."

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 From Coon Shouters to Blues Queens and Literary Muses

“At first glance, it may seem odd that women once enjoyed such a high profile in the blues” (Cohan 87). The opening sentence with which Richard Spottswood begins his chapter on “Women and the Blues” in *Nothing but the Blues*, edited by Lawrence Cohn, may represent the impression of many people on the role of women in the blues field. The Blues, at first thought to most of the mass of people today, usually designates a black man playing acoustic guitar like Son House, or an amplified band led by major representative figures like Muddy Waters or the more contemporary blues icon B. B. King. In general, black blueswomen are marginalized or obscured by bluesmen in both the music industry and the blues criticism, if not forgotten or ignored totally. Nevertheless, the historical significance of black blueswomen, those active in the 1920s in particular, should never be overlooked. They were the pioneers that broke through the mostly closed door of the recording industry for black blues entertainers, paved the way to the professional entertainment industry for following blues artists, shocked the record sales market with huge sales under the race record category, and created images of black women divergent from the cult of true womanhood images demanded by the mainstream culture of all women, though the standards were not thought of as achievable by black women.

Compared to “humble existence” or vague impression of black blueswomen regarded by many people, the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially the period

from 1920 to 1926, was actually the most celebrated time for Vaudeville Blues, which was predominantly a female art form. Interchangeably known as “Classic Blues,” Vaudeville Blues generally refers to a black singing style popular in the 1920s combining the traditional folk blues and materials from tent shows and vaudeville. Compared with “Classic Blues,” an ambiguous term in its own meaning, I regard “Vaudeville Blues” as a more appropriate term to define this genre out of the heavy vaudeville influence on it, although blues critic Derrick Stewart-Baxter considered it as a “drawback” (7). To a certain extent, Vaudeville Blues presents a strong tendency toward popular music and commercialization. Most vaudeville blueswomen were professional vaudeville and cabaret performers frequently accompanied by pianists and/or small jazz ensembles instead of accompanying themselves like traditional country blues singers. Their repertoire usually included vaudeville songs, non-blues pop numbers besides blues songs. As the first blues sub-genre to be recorded, most vaudeville blues songs were not self-written (with a few exceptions like Ma Rainey) by the women singers but were composed by professional Tin Pan Alley black professional tunesmiths like W.C. Handy and Lovie Austin. While the lyrics of Vaudeville Blues songs were generally more sophisticated than that of self-composed country blues numbers, most vaudeville blueswomen (also with a few notable exceptions like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith) tended to favor a sweet and smooth timbre, a clear and precise enunciation as well as an intentionally dramatic delivery manner. Whether these aspects can constitute the “Classic” side of this genre or not remains a controversy, which further complicates the task of classification. Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff address this genre with a term integrating the above two terms, “classic vaudeville blues” (125), in their groundbreaking book on the blues and black

vaudeville *The Original Blues: The Emergence of the Blues in African American Vaudeville*. As blues historians and critics are out of accord with “terming” women’s blues in the 1920s, it undoubtedly marked the unparalleled highlight era of black blueswomen, “black pearls” as Daphne Harrison calls them, in the blues history.

Vaudeville blueswomen’s various and versatile vaudeville styles dominated stages from tent shows, dance halls, cabarets, clubs, cafes and restaurants to vaudeville houses and theaters, sweeping both the South and the North in the 1920s and early 1930s. They claimed center stage in recreational sites in America’s major cities such as Chicago and New York, bringing the blues into a national craze and black blues artists into “professional entertainment” (Baraka 82). During the latter half of 1920s, these women became important phenomenal icons in the American cultural front, presenting a multi-dimensional image of women, black working-class women in particular, and voicing out feminist attitudes from their perspective in a public sphere where black women’s voices were usually unheard.

Although “vaudeville blues” is mostly regarded as the first successfully commercialized and popularized sub-genre of the blues in large scale, “vaudeville” and “blues” were not consanguineous twins in birth. While the blues was generally believed to just originate at the end of the nineteenth century, the format of vaudeville had already crept onto minstrelsy stages, nibbling on the popularity of the “heart of 19-century show business.” It was on the platforms of these “vaudeville minstrelsy” (Abbott & Seroff 2002: xi) that African American women eventually made their way to black

entertainment industry as singers, dancers, and comediennes.<sup>1</sup> By the dawn of the twentieth century, minstrelsy had gradually fallen out of fashion and vaudeville finally began to take its place as America's favorite form of stage entertainment. However, ragtime was the concurrent popular fare that dominated African American entertainment stage and managed to prevail onto the mainstream popular stage by 1890s, albeit only under the racist label "coon song."<sup>2</sup> Those African American women singers later known as "classic/ vaudeville blueswomen" would not even be defined as "blues singers" till 1916 (Abbott and Seroff 2007: 4). By mid-1910s, they were labeled as "up-to-date coon shouters," a slightly modified designation of "coon shouter" which was generally applied to popular ragtime coon song singers, both black and white. Two of the most notable and influential female vaudeville blues singers, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith, were of no exception.

Ma Rainey was still labeled as "a real coon shouter" even in 1913, by *Indianapolis Freeman*, an influential black newspaper with its music columns, when she was first caught singing blues songs on a public platform by the press (Abbott and Seroff 2017:170). In the following year, Bessie Smith was praised by Perry Bradford as "the best coon shouter" he ever heard in his column "Atlanta Show Shops" in the *Freeman* (Abbott and Seroff 2017:171-2). Nevertheless, by the early 1910s the blues had finally

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<sup>1</sup> Abbott and Seroff tracked the first appearance of African American women performers on the stage of black minstrelsy down to the usage of black women performers by Sam T. Jack's Creole Burlesque Company and William Foote's Afro-American Specialty Company in 1891 in *Out of sight* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2002), p.145.

<sup>2</sup> Abbott and Seroff clarify that "ragtime and coon song were virtually synonyms" to the popular music industry and contemporary white audience on p. 3 and summarize the commentary on "coon song as the ragtime fare" in the notes of their second book on black music *Ragged but Right* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2007) on p. 383.

started to claim the vaudeville stage together with other vaudeville acts and freak shows, etc. Until the 1920s when blueswomen like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith made their fame as “blues recording stars,” the blues had already been “a widespread, spontaneous movements” (Abbott and Seroff 2017: 162) in Southern vaudeville with profound experiences on stages ranging from small travelling shows, big tent shows, side shows of big circuses, and minstrel shows, the main employer of most blues singers. The popularity of these supposed blues songs and the improved availability of blues music rolls, together with “the rising race consciousness” (Foreman, 40-41) of black people after the war, motivated and prepared the recording industry to seriously consider the black population as potential profitable buyers of records catering to their tastes. With the inauguration of Mamie Smith’s “crazy blues,” the phonography industry finally opened its gate for professional black entertainers, female singers first considered, to cater to the taste of their own people, which motivated recording companies to invest in advertising widely in black newspapers.

In the 1920s, merchandising vaudeville blues records had relied heavily on advertising presentations. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century advertising had prospered with the proliferation of newspapers and magazines whose advertising sections contributed to bridging manufactures and retailers with consumers. Meanwhile, images of African American people had been used as promotional advertising strategies to sell products since the early 1800s (Kern-foxworth 33), but mostly they conformed to mainstream stereotypes of black people in the white mind as they were targeted at white customers. At the crossroads of advertising a new type of music (only new to white producers) to a new market of black patron, both of which they did not understand, recording companies

adventured with various means of advertising the rising new black female stars in influential black newspapers like the *Chicago Defender*.

Blues critic Elijah Wald confirmed the contribution of the *Chicago Defender* to the dissemination of the blues in the 1920s as the "principal venue for record advertisement aimed to African American consumers" (123). The rapid growth of the circulation of the *Chicago Defender* should be attributed significantly to its promotion of the "Great Migration" of African Americans throughout the South in its news coverage, though it did not commence advocating the black exodus till 1916. Besides advertising jobs and working positions, the *Chicago Defender* also carried entertainment ads such as those race records advertisements. During the heyday of the female vaudeville blues singers, the *Chicago Defender* included thousands of advertisements about them and their music. For example, the paper carried over a hundred ads on Bessie Smith and her records alone in the decade (Dolan 107). Not only Bessie Smith but also other major female classic blues singers were advertised in the *Chicago Defender*, such as Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, Trixie Smith, Alberta Hunter and so on, by major race record labels like Okeh, Paramount, and Columbia. Since no stage performances of these vaudeville singers in the 1920s were recorded, which has greatly hindered the research on their performances, these advertisements of their records of the time serve as important complements to the recordings for musical, literary, sociological, and historical research, even if they were made mostly by white copywriters with the help from black consultants. Frequently these advertisements provided photos or sketches of the women singers while interacting with the contents of the songs with a complimentary tone or in a comic way. Together with the lyrics of the songs and manner of delivery by the singers,



they played a pivotal part in forging the cultural image of the “black pearls” in the 1920s as representatives of lower-class black women.

Although rendered as “sensual commodity,” Vaudeville blueswomen doubtless achieved a moment of glory in the 1920s as a model of blues assertiveness and female articulation overshadowing their male counterparts. Ironically, their literary counterparts active in the contemporary Harlem Renaissance who invest in their middle-class response to black women’s sexuality, such as Nella Larson and Jessie Fauset with the exception of Zora Neale Hurston, almost “ignored” those prominent female stars in the entertainment industry, one of the few realms opened up to black people of the period. Just like the *Chicago Defender* that carried advertisements of the blueswomen but scarcely mentioned them in other editorial sessions, these black women writers invested in their middle-class response to in suppressing black women’s sexuality thus significantly diverged from the bold self-affirmation as sexual beings in women’s blues. Fortunately, vaudeville blueswomen and their music still enact influences on generations of African American writers in both obvious and subtle ways. As pioneers experimenting with poetic usage of the blues tradition, Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown wrote about both the music and musicians including blueswomen. Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Gayl Jones, and James Baldwin make use of blues lyrics and fictionalize blues singers in their novels. Nearly fifty-five years after the peak of vaudeville blueswomen, August Wilson and Sherley Anne Williams pay their homage to two iconic blueswomen, Ma Rainey and Bessie respectively in drama and poetry in Wilson’s play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* and Williams’ poem “Any Woman’s Blues”. Their direct adaptations of the two singers and their songs into literary works, which call back to the imagery of these women shaped by

their blues songs as well as the accompanied advertisements in the 1920s, inaugurate this dissertation project.

## **1.2 Literature Review and Structure**

I set up my goal of this dissertation with the ambition to explore the “wild” imagery of black women prevailing in the Vaudeville Blues songs with the affiliated advertisements as a crucial supplement, and how August Wilson and Sherley Anne Williams capture this imagery of black women and in turn render it to their literary creations. Before I get into outlining the chapters, I’d like to provide a quick review of the past scholarship on the subjects I will discuss. Research on female blues singers is largely marginalized in the blues-research field, just like their obscurity in the blues market after 1926. And the study of advertisements on them is of no exception. There are some significant academic researches interest in race records advertisements. Jeff Titon devotes a critical chapter on the cultural significance of race record advertisements in his book *Early Downhome Blues*, in which he offers a brief look at the history of the race record advertisements although his main interest lies in the use of black vernacular in the ads. Ronald Foreman also spends a chapter in his dissertation “Jazz and Race Record” (1968) to discuss the various advertising strategies in the usage of text and pictures to accommodate the demands of black consumers. Justin Guidry focuses on the humor employed in race records advertisements in his master thesis “Grinning with The Devil.” Guidry thinks advertisements for these types of records were scarcely different from earlier depictions of African Americans in minstrel songbooks, although the latter were advertised to white audiences and the former were meant for black audiences (20). However, I do observe a difference in the portrait of women’s image in terms of women’s

subjectivity and autonomy between the two, which I will discuss in detail in chapter 2. Mark Dolan also explores the image of the South in race record advertisements as a collective shared memory to black readers in his article "Extra! *Chicago Defender* Race Records Ads Show South from Afar." All these research projects touch upon some advertisements of blues women's records in the *Chicago Defender* in the 1920s as examples to analyze the stock images and stereotypes in them. However, scholars have ignored how the contents of these advertisements reveal a particular spectacle of black women's experiences, stirring collective resonances as well as opening up a space for feminist response like what Angela Davis has done with the lyrics of blues women's records in her *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*.

August Wilson is well-received by critics as a two-time Pulitzer winner who was famous for his "Century Cycle" consisting of ten plays to sketch black experience in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With regard to his first fully produce play that inaugurated his success on Broadway *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the male characters such as Levee received much more scholarly attention than "Ma Rainey" even though her name and her song appear in the title. But inspiring research on "Ma Rainey" still exist: James Lawrence Taylor Jr. defines the major female characters in Wilson's plays including Ma Rainey as blueswomen who are essentially living the blues while relating their experiences to a vast body of blues songs in his dissertation "Understanding Wilson's Blueswomen" (2000). Harry Elam Jr. regards "Ma Rainey" as "dichotomously empowered and silenced" but not the primary subject of the play. Doris Davis's recent article "Mouths on Fire" (2020) also analyzes "Ma Rainey" as one of Wilson's "blues women" who already seize the truth of life while the male characters are still searching for it. While these critics analyze

the blues philosophy while meditating on the power struggle within the play, they seem to overlook the role of “Ma Rainey”’s songs in the characterization of herself.

Sherley Anne Williams, mostly credited for her “neo-slave narrative,” “Dessa Rose” (1986) does not receive identical embracement of criticism as a poet as she deserves. Jennifer Ryan spends a chapter on the “bodily politics” of Williams’ Bessie Smith poems in her book *Post-Jazz Poetics*, discussing how her poetry “examines the blues- based feminism embodied by Bessie Smith as both a professional singer and a black woman living in early twentieth- century America.” Michael A. Antonucci studies the “Any Woman’s Cycle” and “Peacock Cycle” in his article “Any Woman’s Blues “Sherley Anne Williams and the Blues Aesthetic” to undercover the blues aesthetic revealed in her poetry. While both of endeavor to explore the profoundness of Williams’ poems in relation to Bessie Smith, they only use the songs of Bessie which Williams draw the themes and structure of her poems of “Classic Blues form” from as outsider references.

To outline the structure of my dissertation, I’d like to start with chapter 2 with which my analytical study begins, as chapter 1 serves the introduction. In chapter 2, I firstly go through the history of recording the blueswomen to pave the way for my discussion of advertisements of their blues songs. Using the Vaudeville Blues advertisements on the *Chicago Defender* as the archive, I put them in context with affiliated songs by blueswomen to carve out a space to analyze the “wild” imagery of underclass black women they present as a whole. In the next two chapter I meant to explore how August Wilson and Sherley Anne Williams inherit such imagery of black women and develop it in their literary works. Chapter 3 is devoted to August Wilson’s

*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, in which I analyze the multi-layer signifying meaning of "black bottom" woven with the five songs of the real Ma Rainey that appear in the play as the basis of Wilson's incarnation of his fictionalized "Ma Rainey." In chapter 4, I place Bessie Smith's song "Any Woman's Blues" side by side with Sherley Anne Williams' poem entitled with the same name to foster my arguments on Williams' inheritance of and new response to women's self-affirmation that embedded in Smith's song. And at last, I wrap up this work with defining the imagery of black women presented in Vaudeville Blues songs and their advertisements, the performance of such imagery in Wilson's play and Williams' poem as "joy born from anguish." As blueswomen sing their songs to assertive their unconforming "wildness" in the mire of racism and sexism, Wilson and Williams characterize their incarnation of "wild women" in their songs sung via their literary works. Last but not least, I endeavor to claim that "the relationship between black music and literature is profoundly reciprocal" (Lordi 1) as Emily Lordi argues. While the literary artistry and value of black music like the outdated and obscured Vaudeville Blues are attested in literary works by writers like Wilson and Williams, their imaginative remolding of black music and musicians bring them (back) to the vision contemporary audience and readership in the arenas of both music and literature.

## CHAPTER 2

### OF RECORDINGS AND YELLOW PRESS-CUTTINGS

Today, nothing remains of the Classic blues but old recordings and yellowed press-cuttings.

-- Paul Oliver, *Story of the Blues*, 1998

#### 2.1 Recording the Blueswomen in the 1920s

By 1920, North America (including United States and Canada), both black and white, had already had some contact with the blues from various sources from sheet music, minstrel and vaudeville shows, street performances, parades, and sideshows of circuses to lately hot ragtime orchestras and jazz bands. Nevertheless, it was phonograph records that made blues a dominant force in the African American entertainment business and the model for later pop trends from R&B to hip-hop, as Elijah Wald claims in his *The Blues: A Very Short Introduction* (21). However, the blues, let alone the blueswomen of the 1920s, were far from the first black voice appeared on records. Black people were heard on recordings as early as 1890, according to the listings in *Blues and Gospel Records 1890-1943*<sup>3</sup>, featuring spirituals by groups like the Fisk Jubilee Singers and comic monologues or “coon songs” recorded by performers such as George Johnson and Bert Williams, and a few dance music recordings by James Reese Europe’s Society Orchestra. Nevertheless, despite being recorded by black performers (handful as there were), little of these early recordings before 1920 could be counted as “genuine” according to Jeff Titon, since most consumers were white instead of black (Titon 197). I personally agree with Titon’s attitude

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<sup>3</sup> The earliest recording made by African American people was recorded on December 19<sup>th</sup>, 1890 by a singing group called “Unique Quartet” as noted by *Blues and Gospel Records*, p.964.

toward the inauthenticity of most early black recordings before 1920, because they were mainly targeted at a white audience, which frequently had deeply ingrained stereotypes that needed to be satisfied for the financial success of the recording. Meanwhile, I am not arguing that blues recordings in the 1920s are “completely pure genuine black music,” since they were still the product of commercialization and industrialization. In fact, it is controversial to define whether any music is “genuine black music” even when the performers are black, and the music style is generally considered as “black,” since commercial recordings are products of the negotiation among performers, producers, and the consumer market, which interwove to complicate the nature of presentation. However, these contending factors involved in the negotiation of the nature of these race records, while none of them had complete control over the making of race music, resulted in space that was definitely not completely free of racism but was at least not necessarily suffocated by it. In the 1920s, female vaudeville blues singers were keen enough to seize this opportunity out of the mire of racism and sexism, breaking open the door to the recording industry that was still mostly closed to professional black entertainers, as well as voicing out their feminist consciousness while they were not allowed to at other moments.

The first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed quite a few essential upheavals socially and culturally in black lives on the land of the United States. The urbanization of a large black population was accelerated with the Great Migration out of harsh economic conditions, segregation legislations, as well as the shortage of labor due to World War I. Black soldiers recruited to the war returned with “new thoughts, new ideas, and new aspirations”<sup>4</sup> later confronted with bloody race riots in 1919, which intensified the ongoing

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<sup>4</sup> *Chicago Defender*. May 31, 1919

race antagonism ever since black people stepped on the New Land as slaves. Meanwhile, black leaders like W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey were uttering and debating fiercely over “radicalism”, “opportunism” or “black nationalism”, while black newspapers and magazines like *Chicago Defender* and *The Crisis* provided a platform for the distribution of these ideologies designating to the essential question of black Americans’ identity. In a word, an “increasingly emphasized feeling of race consciousness” (Foreman 40) was rising among the mindset of a large part of the black masses, if not all of them. As a result, the “Harlem” renaissance sprang up around centers like New York and Philadelphia as the literary and artistic response. Music, as an equivalent counterpart in popular mass culture, also felt the strong urge of an equally emerging consciousness of racial identity: black people were ready for their own recording artists catering to their aesthetic taste as opposed to the minstrelized or plantation-type of entertainment. Meanwhile, the huge price drop of phonographs from \$190 to around \$25 by the end of 1890s (Titon 200-201) guaranteed the availability of talking machines in common black families, which served as the solid material foundation for the sales of records to black patrons. However, though the black consumer market was almost ready for new entertaining records, the recording industry and market, that did not know nor care much about African American musical styles, were not yet convinced that black people needed “something” coming out of themselves to express their particular developing “race feelings.”

The proof did not come till the year of 1920. Blues songwriter Perry Bradford, believing “the four million ‘negroes’ will buy records if recorded by one of their own” (Bradford 116), finally convinced General Phonograph Corporation to record a black



female singer, Mamie Smith, singing two of his compositions “That Thing Called Love” and “You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down” in February 1920. Mamie Smith’s record sold well enough in the South as well as Northern cities Philadelphia and Chicago to manifest the existence of an untapped Southern market of black. Okeh went on to release a second record of Mamie Smith singing two blues songs, “Crazy Blues” and “It’s Right Here for You” in August 1920, accompanied by a black jazz band. As “... something loud and hot that’ll move ‘em” (Bradford 126) as Bradford claimed, it was what black folks wanted, “Crazy Blues” sold crazily, amounting to 75,000 copies within a month at one dollar each and reached an estimated over half a million copies in six months (Jones 9). People in the recording industry were amazingly astonished by the fact that “tens of thousands of black enthusiasts were willing to pay \$1 each (a considerable sum by the standards of the day) to buy a record by a black singer” (Dixon & Godrich 10), hence they quickly followed suit. From 1921, major recording labels like Arto, Emerson, Pathe, Perfect, Black Swan, and Columbia, Paramount, Victor, Ajax, and Vocalion all recorded black female vocalists, by black jazz groups, or pianists (Titon 204). As “every phonograph company has[d] a colored girl recording blues” (204), female black singers like Mamie Smith, Ethel Waters, Lucille Hegamin, Alberta Hunter, Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith seized this unprecedented chance to join the recording industry. The commercial success of vaudeville blues recordings proved that there was a viable market for recordings by African Americans catering to the taste and preferences of black consumers, which in turn led to the establishment and consolidation of a separate catalog of “race records” as a parallel to music marketed to other minority immigrant groups by plentiful recording labels aiming to accommodate black patrons exclusively by 1923 (Wald 24).

The flourishing of race records sales between 1923 to 1926 made these “golden days” for black vaudeville blueswomen, since vaudeville blues songs formed the largest class of race records issued (Titon 207) and the majority of them were recorded by women before they were overshadowed by black male country blues singers. The crown of glory of recording breakthrough was destined to fall on black musicians, albeit *arbitrarily* on black blueswomen. The essential reason for the pecuniary success of vaudeville blues in the third decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century should be attributed to the fact that Bradford tried to convey to recording labels: that the black community yearned for a new genre of secular music born from itself, signaling, and expressing “the rise of a more personalized, individual-oriented ethos among Negroes at the turn of the century” (Levine 223). And by then the blues had ripened as an independent and more importantly, “a highly personalized” music among the black folk, in particular via the help with the work of professional blues composers and entertainers and even popular white blues singers such as Sophie Tucker. Blues songs had become established features of the routines of vaudeville headliners and cabaret performers, according to blues scholar Ronald Foreman (39). The blues was ready to be embraced by a much larger population on a new medium like the phonograph. However, the chance of being the initiator of this blues craze did not have to favor black female blues singers. In fact, although vaudeville blues is generally regarded as a female art form, the vaudeville stage did have renowned male pioneering stars such as Butler “String Beans” May, the greatest attraction of pre-1920 African American vaudeville and the first blues star who popularized “original blues” in black vaudeville (Abbott & Seroff: 2017, 67). There were also other black male blues performers but few of them made phonograph records (it does not mean that their artistry is flawed but the market was not

ready for it). Meanwhile, white female vaudevillians like Sophie Tucker were adding blues songs into their repertoire, which were welcomingly recorded by recording labels and believed to satisfy the blues thirst of both black and white consumer market. As a matter of fact, Okeh had originally wanted Sophie Tucker to record “That Thing Called Love” and “You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down” by Perry Bradford. Unfortunately and fortunately at the same time, Tucker was not able to record them due to her contract with Vocalion Records, regardless of her willingness. Not until this arbitrary and miracle moment did Bradford eventually manage to sell Mamie Smith’s voice to a recording company and in turn to the “four million of colored folks.”

While the male camp of original blues performers were suffering from the loss of the sudden death of String Bean in 1917 and the void of male blues voices on records, black female vaudeville singers led by Mamie Smith managed to seize the valuable opportunity of breaking into the recording market with their versatile artistry and veteran experiences on the vaudeville stage, hence inaugurating their peak time at the initiating phase when the talking machine industry was first open to professional black entertainers and paving the way for later black musicians. It was true that the recording industry as well as most of black middle and upper class still did not hold vaudeville blues recordings in high esteem. Nevertheless, phenomenal sales of “race records” in the 1920s did play a significant role in helping major white recording companies and Columbia and Victor with the fierce competition with radio, a new uprising mass medium, as well as saving Black Swan, the first African-American founded label of the time, from going into bankruptcy in 1921 out of its misjudgment of the black consumer market. Trapped in between the competing pressure from other forms of mass media and the rivalry from peer entrepreneurs, recording

companies relied heavily on advertisements to promote more record sales and sustain their share in the market and. In terms of advertising “race music” like vaudeville blues, it came to the issue of how to advertise them in the black press, a painful, difficult but inevitable problem that recording companies, mostly white, had to solve as Jeff Titon pointed out (Titon 225).

## **2.2 Black Images on Advertising before Blueswomen**

Black female vaudeville blues singers were definitely not the first black faces on advertising materials. There were precedent cases making use of images of black people in the history of advertising long before, initially derived from very early European product packaging featuring diminutive black servants with explicit racist overtones such as exaggerated facial features and emphasized eagerness to wash off their blackness in skin color. In the United States, the slavery period witnessed the advertising of slave trading and fugitive slaves in local and regional newspapers. As slaves themselves were the advertised “object,” most of these advertisements tended to be detailed and descriptive of physical characteristics and/or skillfulness of the individual slave but resembling the way of advertising other articles or items, particularly animals. Though there was little or no distinction in the between the descriptions for male and female runaways in advertisements, female slaves were often associated with the term “wenches,” which reinforced the stereotype of black women as lewd or seductive<sup>5</sup>. Slave advertisements did disclose some crucial historical accounts of the status of black people

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<sup>5</sup> See Kern-Foxworth’s book *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*. Chapter 1 offers a detailed analysis of slave advertisements involving both slaves and slaveholders.

in bondage, nevertheless, they were composed from the biased standpoint of slaveowners, and thus “mirrored” the institution of slavery that viewed black people as “commodity” or “property.” Slave advertisements were the strongest public medium through which white slaveowners could express their racial feelings toward black bondsmen. With the emergence of popular culture, which aimed to entertain and amuse the mass of common people during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a corresponding arena in the entertainment industry to outlet and reshape mainstream white attitudes towards American blacks — minstrelsy— rose in an outstanding fashion.

As the first “Americanized” popular entertainment form, minstrel shows “swept the nation in the mid-1840s” (Toll 31). Placing black characters at its focus, minstrelsy presented to the audience their adapted versions of black dialects, jokes, songs, and dances in the acts, portraying black people as “comic figures” who were “lazy, dirty, esurient, ignorant, superstitious, buffoonish, amoral, criminal and generally subhuman.” Correspondently, posters and playbills advertising minstrel shows as well as sheet music covers advertising minstrel songs frequently portray images of black people with distorted physical features such as grotesque hair, bulging eyes, overdrawn big nose, and wide-open mouths with protruding ruby-red thick lips and white teeth. As a typical example, the images of black men in the playbill of Newcomb’s Minstrels (Figure 1) presented how these physical particularities were caricatured in a grotesque way intentionally. Besides, the portrait of a dark-skinned black woman in the second row left indicated black women of deep skin color did not escape from such disfiguration, even

though women performers of the time were still mostly excluded from the stage<sup>6</sup>. Instead, the protruding lips of this “mammy” archetype in her representative clothing such as a kerchief in plaid pattern were almost always extremely exaggerated. Meanwhile, what is also worth noticing is the sharp contrast between the distorted image of this coal-black mammy and those of the two lighter-skinned women in the bottom row. These two women with yellow skin tone were presented in “lady-like” disposition, with mostly “normal” facial features while dressed up in fancy clothes with silk fans in their hands. The dichotomy between the desexualized coal-black mammy who was nurturing and devoted and the fragile, desirable octoroon, or “yellow gal” in advertisements as well as other print culture products reflected the long-established male gaze that objectified black women with intersecting undertones of racism and sexism. Minstrelsy took these shallow and simplistic stereotypes from the history of disfiguring images of black women and reinforced them through the caricatures of black female figures on stage as well as associative advertising materials.

Besides the “loving loyal mammy” and the “vulnerable seductive octoroon,” the basic stereotypes minstrelsy had also nurtured endured the happy, banjo-strumming plantation “darky,” and old uncle, the lazy, good-for-nothing buffoon, and the pretentious city slicker (Toll 1978). Black people on the minstrel stage were branded with physical peculiarities and intellectual inferiority under the “white gaze” — shaped by white expectations and desires. These biased stereotypes in minstrelsy were solidified during the Civil War era and worsened with the deterioration of race relations towards the end of

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<sup>6</sup> The Hyers Sisters, Anna and Emma, were the first African American women to perform on the Vaudeville stage in 1876. Before them, women characters were generally performed by male female impersonators.

the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Meanwhile, similar racist overtones also penetrated concurrent commercial advertising that prospered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well via the usage of images of black people. The first large-scale use of blacks in advertising in the United States came with the introduction of trade cards (mostly used as gift with purchase especially during the Victorian Era) in the early 1800s and became regular when trading cards enjoyed their greatest popularity between the 1870 and 1890 (McDonough & Egolf 25). Varied greatly in subject matters, “some of the cards depicted black people in a positive manner, but others were blatantly racist” (Kern-Foxworth 34). Cards with demeaning or derogatory depictions of black people’s visages such as large heads, pop eyes, thick lips and huge teeth were used to advertise items such as cotton seeds, and fading complexion creams, which easily connected the distorted appearance of the black race with racist designations to slave labor and racial prejudice over their darker skin color by emphasizing black people’s eagerness to wash off their darkness.

Trader cards gradually “lost their momentum with the advent of national magazines” (Kern-Foxworth 35) towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Meanwhile, with the growth of free black communities after the Civil War, black people also increased their participation in the buying public as a viable consumer market. As a result, black-owned newspapers also started selling advertising space to merchants who aimed to attract black consumers. The slight move toward pleasing black consumers with the rise of black people’s buying power failed to stop the demeaning usages of black characters in advertisements, but the racist tone in these portraits did make a subtle turn. Instead of being depicted as cannibal-exotics in servitude with over-exaggerated facial features, blacks were more frequently portrayed as servants like “porters, chefs, maids and butlers”

or ignorant people, children, or pets with intellectual inferiority in the advertisements of bottles, boxes, tins, and blotters and so on. Aunt Jemima, a trade mark of a breakfast food brand owned by the Quaker Oats Company of Chicago, a subsidiary today of PepsiCo, is a best example. Whether originated from the image of black female servants in ancient Europe<sup>7</sup> or prominent “Aunt Jemima” figures in minstrel shows in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>8</sup>, Aunt Jemima’s image did conform to the stereotypical servant or caretaker of the “mammy” archetype:

“Aunt Jemima” was pictured as a fat, shiny, dark-faced woman with glowing white teeth. Her head was covered with a scarf knotted in the back, and the white collar on her polka-dot dress served as a support for her double chin. With her sparkling eyes, unpointed nose, and dimpled jaw, Aunt Jemima was said to symbolize the congeniality of the antebellum servant and the surrogate mother to slaveholders and their children, acting as a satisfied slave or a satisfying mammy. (Griffin 75) (figure 2)

In a word, she represented the imaginably contented house slaves who ostensibly played the roles of “aunt or uncle” but remained powerless due to their “inferior” racial identity.

By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Aunt Jemima and other stereotypes were in integral part of American culture images reflecting blacks in docile and servile roles included Rastus (Cream of Wheat), Uncle Ben, and the Gold Dust Twins (Kern-Foxworth 63). Though the racist overtone in many advertisements was a little less pronounced, the caricatures of black people in some advertisements still fell into the stereotypically

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<sup>7</sup> Verta Mae in her *Thursdays and Every Other Sunday Off: A Domestic Rap* (1972) suggests the foundation of Aunt Jemima is rooted in the historical context of using black slaves for preparation and serving food in ancient Rome and Europe.

<sup>8</sup> Another possible origin of Aunt Jemima could be Billy Kersands' American-style minstrelsy/vaudeville song "Old Aunt Jemima", written in 1875. The Aunt Jemima character was so prominent in minstrel shows in the late 19th century to be possibly adopted by commercial interests to represent the Aunt Jemima brand.



degrading mode while portraying their physical features. For example, around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the advertisements *Gold Dust Twins Washing Powder* depicted a pair of black twins (most frequently twin boys) as a symbol of the washing powder, telling American housewives to “let them do the work” (figure 3). The caricatures of the black twin boys on the packaging adopted the typical disparaging stereotypes of black children as dark-skinned pickaninnies, with bulging eyes and protruding lips, half-naked with miniskirts marked with the logo “Gold Dust.” The exaggerated features of their visages as well as their nudity conveyed an implied message that black children were “less civilized” than the fully dressed white woman with an “ordinary face” beside them. Moreover, as showed in figure 3 the black twins were characterized as “saviors” to free a toiled lower-class woman from doing cleaning work via the slogan “let them do the work.” This slogan recurred in many of Gold Dust advertisements paired with the black twins washing tons of kitchen and household articles such as in figure 4 .This advertising strategy of using black children as symbolization of a more efficient cleaning means at lower cost than soaps and other competing products itself could be easily connected with the exploitation of the labor of black children dated back to slavery and meanwhile would reinforce the degrading pickaninny labeling of black children. Though the Gold Dust twins belonged to the underclass, middle class black children did not escape from similar denigration. A late nineteenth century advertising giveaway cardboard (figure 5) presents a black kid riding a horse toy while holding a white doll girl. The black girl wears a white dress or night gown, a bonnet and leather boots riding on a real horse or a horse toy, which indicates her middle-class family background, at least not much poorer than the white doll girl with a fancy hat and dress. In this sense, this advertising giveaway does

not deliberately differentiate the economic status between the black girl and the white doll girl she is holding but presents both as coming a decent economic background. Nevertheless, compared with the ordinary and regular-sized facial features of the white doll girl, the visage of the black girl is still portrayed in a resembling derogatory pickaninny fashion with kinky hair, exaggerated-sized eyes, and lips with unmissable white teeth. The overstatement of racial features of black people in these advertisements represented an explicit designation to racial inferiority imposed on them by the society of the time. Although scholars have theorized that the subordinate position into which blacks have been categorized is rooted in an ideology of black inferiority, “what is less well known is that American popular culture has been an important vehicle transmission of those ideological notions” (Barnett 42). As a wide-spreading and vital component of popular mass culture, commercial advertising with negative and dehumanizing caricatures of black people played an inevitable part in shaping, disseminating, and facilitating the internationalization of a national ideology of black inferiority.

As commercial advertising of living necessities started using black characters in a large scale to promote sales toward the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, American race entertainment industry that had made profit from music related to black Americans in minstrel shows also found a new venue: coon songs: “Coon songs, with their ugly name, typically featured lyrics in Negro dialect, caricaturing African American life, set to the melodious strains of ragtime music” (Abbott & Seroff :2007, 11). The insulting designation of “coon” to African Americans was said to come from *barracoona*, from Portuguese *barraca*, which means "slave depot, pen or rough enclosure for black slaves in transit in West Africa, Brazil, Cuba," and was boosted by the enormously popularity of

George Washington Dixon's blackfaced minstrel act "Zip Coon" in the 1830s (figure 6). Zip Coon presented an urbanized stereotype, a black dandy "sporting his flashy attire and projecting a slick, urbane persona" (Dorman 451) which "played uppity" via the mimicking of the white middle class. Alongside with the more ruralized stereotypical character Jim Crow (figure 7) dressed in rags, battered hat and torn shoes, Zip Coon presented the dominant caricature of mainstream imagination of black people in the popular culture at the dawn of Civil War.<sup>9</sup> By 1862 "coon" had gradually narrowed its reference to black person exclusively (Flexner 54). When it came to the Gilded Age "Coon" in the vernacular of America clearly and unmistakably meant "black" while coon songs featured ascriptive qualities associated with black life and character (Dormon 452-453). Accordingly, explicit "coon" themed songs such as "New Coon in Town" mainly written by white songwriters also surged into popularity during the 1880s.

As the successor to minstrel music in the race entertainment industry, coon songs inherited the core of its precedent: the ridiculing of black Americans and their lives (including their ways of entertainment) as well as the humorous presence on stage. Meanwhile, corresponding to the intensifying atmosphere of race relations after reconstruction, coon songs also presented significant change in terms of black caricatures. One of the earliest surviving coon songs entitled "De Coon Dat Had de Razor" (1885) by a black writer is worth noticing. According to the sheet music record archived by the Library of Congress, the lyric of this song depicted how "dem coons" all

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<sup>9</sup> According to Stuart Flexner, "coon song" adapting the tune of "Turkey in the Straw" in the 1830s did not designate to black people specifically. Even in the 1840s and 50s "coon songs" were still Whig political songs (See p.54). Nevertheless, Dixon's acting "Zip Coon" singing "coon song" in the 1830s indisputably contributed significantly to the solidification of the degrading designation of "coon" to black people.

carry razors and cut each other at a ball. Meanwhile, a cartoonish illustration (commonly used as an advertising strategy for sheet music) presented a corresponding scene: the central black figure with an ostensibly sober face walked down the street with a sharp-edged razor in contrast with other black people and a white policeman scattering in the background. Compared with “Zip coon” in figure 6, the central figure is attired in an alike dandy fashion with a fancy top hat, a bow tie, and a three-piece swallow tailed suit and shiny leather shoes. The ridicule of black people’s “gaudy taste” and “intruding” facial features were persistently consistent whereas the atmosphere in the cartoonish advertisement of “coon that had the razor” was overwhelmingly more tense than the buffoonery tune in that of “Zip Coon.” Danger could be implied from details such as the black central figure’s malicious facial expression, and the wide razor blade he was holding. Even the accessory chain also featured an angry bull dog instead of those merely luxurious accessories on “Zip Coon.” Other people at the scene were hastily running away from him with a peeping manner out of fear, including a white policeman holding a truncheon. Echoed by the old policeman Haiser’s words in the lyrics stating that “I’ aint gwine to touch dat coon, For he has got a razor,” this advertisement conveyed the same message with the lyrics: “coons” were threateningly dangerous! This “razor-holding” image of black persona in early coon songs marked the shift of black caricature in popular culture from ignorant but unthreatening buffoonery to violent hazardous or potentially criminal. Beyond imaging black people’s inclination to criminality such as gambling and violence, coon songs also exploited their preferences for food (like watermelon and chicken), aspiration to social acceptance, and the “ultimate” desire to be “whitened” for comic possibilities. As the U.S. entered the “nadir” period of race

relations at the closure of Reconstruction in 1877, black people were deprived of many civil rights and driven into the mire of subordination, disfranchisement, and ultimately the legal segregation of Southern Jim Crow laws acquiesced to by the North. With the increase of expressions of white supremacy and racial violence all over the country, “coon” imagery of African Americans mirrored and reinforced “the ongoing commitment to racist assumptions that underlay the system of American apartheid in which blacks were maintained in subordinate and subservient roles” (Dormon 465). In a word, “coon” was the concurrent imagined caricature of African Americans imposed by the mainstream racist mindset.

The 1880s witnessed the portentous rising of coon song hits such as “The Alabama Coon” and “New Coon in Town” into the popular music industry. Nevertheless, real national fascination with “coon songs” did not commence until 1897 with the inception of “ragtime coon song” (Abott& Seroff: 2007, 11). When the century drew to a close, ragtime made its stunning leap from African American underclass culture into mainstream popular culture via the dissemination of piano professionals like Jelly Roll Morton and Scott Joplin. Regardless of ragtime musician’s ground-breaking artistic achievements with syncopation in piano rag compositions and performances, coon songs set to the melodious strains of ragtime music were much more appealing to the mainstream audience. Among them stood the most famous or notorious ragtime coon song: Ernest Hogan’s epoch-defining “All Coons Look Alike to Me” (1896). Adopting a cakewalk rhyme to a revised version of a song called “All Pimps look Alike to Me” Hogan incidentally picked up in Chicago, this song sold one million copies, and thus

officially kindled the “coon song” fad as about 600 coon songs flooded into the market in five years afterwards (White 99).

In contrast with those razor-carrying “coon” figures in early coon songs and later very insidious coon songs, Hogan’s song had little explicit degradation to African Americans. This song was about a man’s mourning about losing his woman to a wealthier man, claiming “All coons look alike to me, I have got another beau you see / And he is just as good to me as you ever tried to be. / He spends his money free, I know we can’t agree / So I don’t like you no how, all coons look alike to me.” Hogan probably did not take “coon” as a derogatory term for his race, at least not expecting how rotten it would become in the following decade. However, the cartoon advertisement at the outset of the sheet music pamphlet conveyed an exact message that white audiences had in mind (figure 8): all “coons” (blacks) look alike to me. This ad presented six black men attired in suits of different luxurious but garish styles accessorized with hats, ties or bows. Nevertheless, tall or short, slim or plump, garnished or not, their facial features resembled each other, which clearly designated to the “likeness” of all “coons” claimed by the female persona in the song. Ironically, even the female character put at the center right in this cartoon did not present any individual particularities except her feminine body shape. They were all painted as with kinky hair, coal black skin tone and protruding red lips. The message was explicit: all black people were identical regardless of age, stature, profession or even gender. Moreover, the outstanding red color on the character’s clothes and accessories like ties and gloves, as well as the sharp contrast between the red bevel and black flat front of the title, was clearly a racist mockery of the “red lips” of black people. The original song might just note a material girl’s excuse for her betrayal of her

relationship. Unfortunately and pathetically, the title was taken and used by a Jim Crow society as a mechanism to deny the individuality of black people. Hogan's song was one of the earliest national hits catering to ragtime music which started a new sensation combining "coon" with ragtime syncopation. Nevertheless, the mainstream racist mentality escalated a novelty song into a national obsession of racist taunting and abject embarrassment incited by the title more than musical celebrations. Ragtime coon songs amazed the popular mind but what was remembered and repeated by the public was largely insidious "coon" contents.

Coon songs proliferated in music hall and vaudeville performances and in sheet music form, initiated a national fad from the early 1880s. Not all of them ridiculed African Americans, but derisive ones were apparently more popular as the public demanded what catered to their imagination of the "inferior." Consequently, black entertainers were mostly confined to minstrelsy and "coonery" for survival. Even the most welcomed comedy and dance duo that won over the heart of white audience, Bert Williams and George Walker, had to black up to act "Two Real Coons" to improve chances of bookings. From a historical perspective, coonery consolidated the disparaging minstrel stereotypes from the old times, which was borrowed and performed by white performers primarily. Nevertheless, with this "coon" mask, black entertainers like Hogan and Williams secured opportunities to claim the stage as professionals and profited commercially. With the participation of black performers, coon songs did prompt the acceptance of more "authentic" black musical materials like ragtime and later blues and jazz, while vaudeville came to replace minstrelsy as America's new favorite entertainment form. The immense popularity of ragtime coon songs together with other

comic kits and burlesque shows also paved the way for the emergence of black vaudeville, an exclusive black musical theatrical entertainment that “brought about a confluence of creative and the commercial purposes, resulting in unique and unexpected opportunities for black entertainers (Abbott & Seroff :2007 38)”, especially for black women.

Frustratingly but helplessly, the first chance for black people to be entertainers was provided by black minstrelsy emerging from the 1850s, though oldline minstrel shows were predominantly male dominated.<sup>10</sup> But women found their places during the course of the popularization of coon songs. When ragtime burst onto the scene during the season of 1897-1898, a new generation of white, pre-dominantly female “coon specialists” such as Elizabeth Murray sprang up, who became popularly known as “coon shouters” (Abbott & Seroff :2007, 15). Coon shouters were not exclusively female but women apparently overshadowed male performers. Popular white “coon shouters” active on vaudeville stage before the 1920s included May Irwin and Clarice Vance, whose half-length portraits were paired side to side by Victor Records in an ad as early as 1908 (figure 9). Figure 9 is a classic example of mounting half-length portraits of respectably dressed hit-song singers including coon shouters contracted under one label side by side. Figure 10 and 11 offers a better sense of an honorable persona of “coon shouters” on stage in luxurious gowns, contrastive to the lowdown coon content in their songs. They sang coon songs with heavily loaded racist bigotry and stereotyped mimicking of imagined black caricatures (songs by May Irwin in particular) hard to digest nowadays.

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<sup>10</sup> Female minstrel troupes like 'Madame Rentz's Female Minstrels' did appear in 1870s, but what they actually performed were more standard shows other than minstrelsy.



However, undoubtedly, they helped propel ragtime coon songs to prominence around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as Abbott and Seroff claimed (4). More importantly, their appearance and success in vaudeville as well as recording industry paved the way for black women to be accepted in show business as “authentic” coon shouters. In addition, their performing styles as comediennes singing “lowdown and dirty” songs in luxurious costumes also contributed to the shaping of the imagery of female black performers on stage. Meanwhile, advertising materials such as flyers and sheet music covers put forward by recordings companies offered a historical glimpse on how they followed suit to advertise black vaudevilliannes later.

### **2.3 Advertising the Blueswomen in the 1920s**

In the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, black female entertainers finally made their appearance on minstrel, vaudeville and burlesque stages as exerted an immediate influence as dancers, singers, and comediennes. Just as ragtime and coon songs cleared the way for “original blues,” female black entertainers also accumulated valuable experiences and profitable fame that eventually sent them into the studios of recording companies. As Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff claimed, “records are the sources of their (vaudeville blueswomen) enduring fame” (Abbott & Seroff 2017: 178). The national fame of vaudeville blues in the 1920s would have never been achieved without the popularization of the phonograph and phonographic records, which played an indispensable and crucial role in the dissemination of the blues as well as other popular music in the 20th century. The huge record sales and fierce competition due to new releases every week also motivated record labels to invest in advertising venues for promotions. During the vaudeville blues period, three major recording labels, Columbia,

OKeh, and Paramount, advertised extensively (Dixon & Godrich 28) in the black press, black community newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* in particular, to reach out to the black population. Nevertheless, selling race records by these newly-crowned “blues queens,” a product per se that was neither a living necessity nor “whitening” commodity, all blacks (especially black women) would long for as assumed by most white proprietors, as well as advertising them to the black consumer market were unprecedented experiences tangled with uncertainty for the manufactures in the industry.

Main recording labels like Victor had started advertising campaigns in mass newspaper and magazine promoting their latest opera and popular records by 1912 (Titon 200). What’s more important, the black press hailed Mamie Smith’s first recording with OKeh (“That Thing Called Love”), which probably contributed greatly to the unexpected high sales as the manufacturer observed (Dixon & Godrich 9)<sup>11</sup>. Consequently, when records targeted to black consumers were issued, it was a natural choice for the record labels to advertise them in the black press. As opposed to the late twentieth-century’s association of the term “literature” with imaginative writing such as novels and poetry, other forms of print culture such as treaties, declarations, letters, magazines, and pamphlets comprised an important part of what African Americans read to themselves and to each other in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (McHenry 11-12). Among these various forms of “literature,” all kinds of journalism, most significantly

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<sup>11</sup> According to Robert Dixon and John Godrich, OKeh simply listed it as “Mamie Smith, Contralto” and made no attempt to invest much in advertising. However, the black press was claiming “Mamie made a recording” and the sales were out of expectation. The company might be shocked at the eagerness and affordability of the black consumer market, but the black press definitely played an unignorable part in disseminating the recording debut of female race artist.

newspapers, reached a wide and large readership in the black community, covering and reporting political, social, and business affairs as well as entertainment promotions from the perspective of black readers. As a means of communication that was directed toward “the maintenance” of a society, these black newspapers penetrated into black communities, shaping and also shaped by the consciousness of them as “representation[s] of shared beliefs” (Carey 18).

The history of black press can be dated back to 1827 when John Russwurm and Samuel Cornish started *Freedom’s Journal* in New York City. Nevertheless, the glory of black press did not commence until the African Americans’ Great Migration starting from mid-1910s, in which black journalism played a crucial role in advocating and bridging the mass movement of Southern black folk to Northern and Western cities. Nearly 500 black newspapers were in print by the early 1920s, according to the first in-depth documentary film examining the history and contributions of black newspapers *The Black Press: Soldiers Without Sword* (first released in 1999). Although many of them were short-lived, there were also outstanding and influential black newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* catching and stirring research interests. Founded by Robert Abbott in 1905, the weekly *Chicago Defender* rose as the “most important black newspaper” (Ottley 9) in the United States in a little more than a decade. Enhanced by the location of Chicago as “the railroad center of the nation” and the newspaper’s enthusiastic advocacy of the Great Migration starting from 1916<sup>12</sup>, the *Chicago Defender* reached one-tenth of

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<sup>12</sup> Before 1916 Robert Abbott was a strong supporter of Booker T. Washington, believing “it is best that the ninety and nine of our people to remain in the southland.” Only after witnessing the sudden opening of Chicago’s unskilled industrial jobs to blacks in the summer of 1926 out of labor shortage caused by the war did he started advocating the

the black population all over the country by 1920, emerging as "the first black newspaper to gain extensive national circulation" (Suggs 24-25). As "the most widely read newspaper in the black South" (Grossman 94), *Chicago Defender* broadcast information and messages on all aspects of black life and interest, ranging from "crimes of inhumanity against black people," employment opportunities, social and religious news, to leisure activities such as sports and entertainment hits. One of the earliest black newspapers to carry an extensive entertainment section, the *Chicago Defender* did not only portray Chicago as a dazzling entertainment cite spotlighted by live music, dancing crowds (sometimes racially mixed) and theatre visitors, but also circulated abundant display advertisements of trending black "hot music," especially those of vaudeville blues records blooming in the first half of the 1920s. During the years of vaudeville blues from 1923-1926, major race recording labels, such as Okeh, Columbia, and Paramount all advertised their black artists on the *Chicago Defender* extensively. As an indispensable part of the remained "yellow press-cuttings" featuring vaudeville blues alongside the recordings, these advertisements become an important indicator of the concurrent popular culture concerning vaudeville blueswomen of the time.

The black press like the *Chicago Defender* offered the best platform for vaudeville blues advertisements to reach black consumers. However, it was not so easy a mission for the advertising departments of recording companies to compose advertisements on a new genre of music, vaudeville blues, which was female dominated, to an untested market of the black population. Most labels that earned enough income

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black migration with a front-page photograph of black people crowding alongside a railroad truck (see Grossman p. 91-92).

from race records as to be able to afford advertising venues were white companies, such as Okeh, Paramount, and Columbia, except for the Black Swan label, which was owned and operated by African Americans before being bought by Paramount. Therefore, it was hard to imagine an advertising section for "race records," a musical category born out of a culture with an already established racial hierarchy, without incorporation of racism. However, as race records were made especially for black patrons, the record labels would endeavor not to offend their customers with overt racist imagery so as not to drive them away. Above all, what these recording companies were selling was a product that the customers "could refuse to buy" (Titon 219). Nevertheless, as Titon explains in *Early Downhome Blues*, the white-dominated recording industry "did not wholly understand" (219) the music and the consumer. Consequently, they made use of a variety of advertising methods while exhibiting "ambivalent feelings, ambiguous symbols, and contradictory activities" (219) in them.

At first the recording labels followed the "standard" trend set by previous advertisements of opera records, which was followed suit by those advertising white coon shouters, combining a photograph or sketch of the singer (sometimes together with the accompanying band), with a textual description addressing necessary information, such as content of the record, the publisher, and purchasing venues, with or without a brief complimentary comment on the singer, the song, or the record. Mamie Smith and her Jazz Hounds were pictured in formal and costly gown and suits on the sheet music cover of "Crazy Blues" published in 1920 (figure 12). In contrast, the first advertisement of "Crazy Blues" in the *Chicago Defender* that appeared in November 1920 just came with a line announcing the debut of the record's distribution (figure 13), which seemed to hint

at the distributor's uncertainty on the advertising budget of a female black artist's blues record to the black audience. However, if this simple textual announcement was a test of the consumption capacity of the untapped black consumer market, the result must have pleased the sellers. In January of 1921, a display ad (figure 14) presenting a small picture of Mamie Smith appeared in the *Chicago Defender*. And the next month saw a bigger and clearer sketch of the singer (figure 15), possibly based on a studio headshot portrait published in *The New York Age* in 1920 (figure 16). This portrait (as well as the sketch in *Defender*) presented Mamie Smith in an elegant fashion with her jewelry and hairdo even though none of her clothes were revealed. It is not novel for the industry to advertise white female entertainers including comedienues in such refined poise. However, comparing with former minstrel and plantation stereotypical images like "mammy," featuring black female blues singers in respectability without overt racist and sexist connotations was undoubtedly a hard endeavor intended for catering to black patrons.

The rising investment in advertising was an explicit signal of satisfying record sales as other manufactures quickly followed suit to advertise their black female blues singers in the *Chicago Defender*. Black Swan, the first black-owned recording label, launched an extensive advertising campaign tagging its motif "the only phonograph company owned and controlled by colored people" in the black press including *Defender*, to win over consumers' preference since the spring of 1921. Claiming ambitiously to furnish "every type of race music" (Foreman 74), Harry Pace, founder of Black Swan, favored what he called "cultural music," such as European classics and sentimental fare (Thygesen et al. 7), or what he considered as "high standard." Pace was a believer of

“racial uplift” via elevating musical esthetics.<sup>13</sup> Besides naming the recording company “Black Swan” with the logo of an elegant pose of a black swan after the sobriquet of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, a popular African American concert singer, Pace also rejected Bessie Smith because of her “blacker” style but signed Ethel Waters for her sweeter and smoother delivery of blues songs. Therefore, it was not surprising at all that Black Swan, “the only serious competitor” (Dixon & Godrich 19) with OKeh for the race market before Paramount and Columbia emerged as major race labels in 1923, was a faithful supporter of the “standard” and respectful way of advertising vaudeville blueswomen. On January 7<sup>th</sup> of 1922, Black Swan called for patronization in *Chicago Defender*, placing a half-length portrait of its financial fortune-changer Ethel Waters<sup>14</sup> in display while honoring her as “queen of blues singers” (figure 17). Her hat, dress and pose all together presented her with a composition of a fair lady in oil painting if not royal enough as a “queen.”

Black Swan’s persistence in presenting their race artists with respectability could be confirmed by the display ad for its secondary anniversary observance in *Chicago Defender* (figure 18). “Pace Phonograph marshalled an impressive roster of performers

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<sup>13</sup> In a speech to the National Association of Negro Musicians (a group that favored classical musical education for African Americans), Pace described Black Swan’s endorsement of popular music (including the blues) as a “strategical, temporary concession” to cultivate a taste for higher musical culture. He explained, “We have had to give the people what many of them wanted to get them to buy what we wanted them to want.” He aimed to take the responsibility of “musical uplift” of the race, as he concluded his speech, “I believe that we [Negroes] want every kind of music other people want [,] and it behooves some of us to undertake the job of elevating the musical taste of the race. . . Black Swan Records are trying to do their part.” See Suisman 1310-1311.

<sup>14</sup> With the release of “Down Home Blues,” Ethel Water’s first disc with Black Swan, average monthly sales mounted to \$20000 from less than \$700 in 1921, which apparently saved Black Swan from its previous financial mire. See *Black Swan: The Record Label of the Harlem Renaissance*. P9.

and recordings for display to the public,” as described by Ronald Foreman (Foreman 78), in which female and male vocalists and instrumentalists appeared adjacent to each other and all attired respectably. Meanwhile, Black Swan’s anniversary message recalled its commitment to “high class music” made by African American artists as the:

only bonafide Racial Company making talking machine records. All stock-holders are Colored, all artists are Colored, all employees are Colored. Only company using Racial Artists in recording high class song records. This company made the only-Grand Opera Records ever made by Negroes. All others confine this end of their work to blues, rags, comedy numbers, etc. Pioneer company in this field. List of artists includes many of the most prominent concert artists as well as vaudeville stars.

Among the five female vocalists displayed in the ad who were appareled, jeweled, and photoshotted similarly, the two much better-selling blues singers, Ethel Waters and Trixie Smith, were numbered top two before Josie Miles, a vaudeville singer used to take a part in musical comedy *Shuffle Along*, Antoinette Garnes, the first black artist to make a grand opera record, and Florence Cole Talbert. Yet the textual description put the emphasis on its inclusion of “the most prominent concert artists as well as vaudeville stars” as an appeal to black patrons in contrast with other white-owned labels confining to “hot music” such as ragtime and blues. Pace was still commercially practical, highlighting its best-selling vaudeville blues star Ethel Waters’ two new records beyond entitling her as “queen of the blues.” Nevertheless, “Miss Black Swan” (Ethel Waters) deserved this particular position due to her “finer interpretation” of blues singing rather than numerous record sales as declared by the ad. Via praising “finer” style of blues singing as well as presenting female vaudeville blues singers with same degree of respectability and dignity with “high class” artists in advertisements, Black Swan never concealed its ambition to uplift the “lower-class” and “rough-edged” blues to middle-



class standards of “dignity, refinement, and self-restraint” (Suisman 1309). Unfortunately, the general black consumer market did not buy Pace’s ideology of uplifting the race through music and business as he expected. Out of financial difficulty, Pace agreed to lease record plates to Paramount for reissuing in 1924 but the sales failed to please it.<sup>15</sup> In mid-1925 Paramount ceased its special series of Black Swan, which announced the final downfall of the label as well as Pace’s musical uplift experiment.

Unlike Black Swan’s campaign on musical uplift, its concurrent white-owned rival labels like Paramount and Columbia apparently did not care about images of vaudeville blueswomen. Notwithstanding, it was safe and efficient to adopt a traditional and standard strategy to advertise a female vaudeville blues singer with a photo, or a sketch mirroring a photo, to publicize new record releases while escaping from the risk of offending black patrons due to stereotypical presentations such as those used to in earlier minstrel or coon song sheet music ads for white audiences. Paramount advertised its main female blues singers such as Alberta Hunter in a similar fashion, featuring these women stylishly and elegantly in terms of hair, costume and jewelry while complimenting their vocal talent (figure 19 & 20). In comparison to early competitors for the race market like Okeh, the initiator of race records, and Paramount that absorbed Black Swan, the highlight of Columbia’s exploration in race records market did not come till it signed up Bessie Smith in 1923, an already well-known vaudeville blues singer in the South. The company overtly played safe with Bessie Smith’s recording debut in both recording

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<sup>15</sup> It was general acknowledged that Paramount took over Black Swan in 1924. However, according to a later letter by Pace, he was not selling but just *leasing* record plates to Paramount as no white record companies could or would buy Black Swan out of financial blow. See *Paramount’s Rise and Fall: The Roots and History of Paramount Records*. 88-89.

content and advertising strategy, making her covering Alberta Hunter's hit "Down Hearted Blues," and advertised her in the standard trend: praising her "rich melodious voice" with a photo of Bessie with popular bobbed hair and a beaded dress (figure 21). As the enormous success of Bessie Smith's recordings quickly elevated her to the "Empress of the Blues." In correspondence, Columbia presented her crowned "royally" on top of beaded or sequined dresses or gowns of concurrent fashion of female opera divas in display ad photos or sketches (figure 22).

To a certain degree, Columbia had been a "faithful" follower of the "standard" advertising trend — combining an artist's image, photo or sketch, with a brief description of the record and/or the singer — when advertising its race listings in the black press. Bessie Smith's "standard debut advertising photo" reappeared in ads of her later records in 1925, 1926, and 1928 etc. (figure 23-25). Figure 26 presented her in a sleeveless beaded dress with her hair knotted in an ad of 1928, which was followed by a mirroring sketch in another ad of 1929 (figure 27). Of course, Bessie Smith was not the unique race star to attire in the fashion of female trendsetters in Columbia's race record advertisements in *Chicago Defender*. Another fine vaudeville blues singer Clara Smith was advertised in a fashionable flapper dress with neck and waist accessories, hair bobbed as well (figure 27) in October 1924. Two months later, Columbia put launched a full-page display of its female and male blues stars all attired respectably, emphasizing Bessie Smith's honorific as "Empress of the blues" with a heart-shaped jeweled crown on her head. For efficiency (as it did save time and energy to use a real photo or mirroring sketch) or lucre (presenting blueswomen in respectability to please black consumers, as

least the elites), Columbia did stick with this fashion of “standard” advertising strategy till the end of the decade as vaudeville blues craze was falling.

Most advertising photos or sketches used in advertisements of race record labels like Columbia mirrored the appearances of female blues singers on stage and in tailored studio photos in a style mimicking respectable opera divas or affluent middle- or upper-class white women with fashionable dresses, fur coats and fine jewelry. In contrast, in reality most vaudeville blueswomen started as poor girls and sang about life and hardships of lower-class black folks, especially black women. According to Jeff Titon, advertising is "based upon an image of who the consumers are and who they should like to become"(Titon 219). Better economic and social status, in other words, respectability, were what most working-class African Americans would long for, at least possibly presumed by “Race uplift” advocates like the *Chicago Defender*. In this sense, the ostensibly temporary uplift of "social status" from lower-class (as revealed in lyrics) to middle class (as signified by extravagant costumes and accessories these blues singers wore in race record ads), at least economically, may be regarded as part of the reasons that the *Chicago Defender*, an influential newspaper advocating "messages of race uplift" (Dolan 107), would carry ads for "low-down" blues music besides the consideration of budget. Meanwhile, this thriving spirit also corresponded with one essential philosophy of industrious black people in the aftermath of World War I: people were always struggling for a better life regardless of all harsh realities. Therefore, a great number of them joined in the Great Migration, abandoning their Southern homes to seek for better opportunities northward. Mostly recorded in studios in cities like New York and Chicago, vaudeville blueswomen made their fame as race record stars and their

success given the turmoil of racism and sexism marked the value and contribution of this usually marginalized group in the Great Migration.

Uplift propagandists like the *Chicago Defender* and black-owned label Black Swan exerted influence to elevate the musical taste of black consumers via preference of respectable presentations of black blues and jazz artists and propaganda for patronage of “higher-class” numbers. Nonetheless, major white recording companies did not always believe that “respectability” promoted sales. Based on the idea that people love entertainment and laugh as well as the proven success of its precedent newspaper advertising in cartoon style, Okeh’s parent company General Phonograph declared the turn of its window displays from “pretty pictures that don’t make sale” to cartoonish illustrations as early as January 1922 (Foreman 216). Nevertheless, its first Okeh comic advertisement by black performers on the *Chicago Defender* did not come until May 1922, notwithstanding its roster of comic window display cards had already found Mamie Smith’s “Wang Wang Blues” in the midst of other 7 releases by white performers (figure 29) in January. As Mamie Smith was Okeh’s biggest race star, the new comic cartoonish ad was still filed for her new hit “Doo-Dah Blues” (figure 30). The word “Doo-Dah” was used as the repeated line-ending of the lyrics of a hit minstrel song “Camptown Races” of 1850 (figure 31). In this sense, this word might carry on the connotation of “ending” in “Doo-Dah Blues” as the persona’s sweetie used it in her farewell words (figure 31). This song was a regular and ordinary bluesy grieving over a lost lover, which had nothing to do with gambling or other entertainment venues. But the accompanied cartoon advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* presented an explicit stereotypical illustration: beyond their black skin tone and protruding lips, the left figure was positioned in a

buffoonery minstrel dancing step while the right figure with an extraordinary big head was rolling dice with two grotesque gambling gremlins, which hinted at the idleness and cannibal aspects of coon imagery. Compared with dignified images of vaudeville blueswomen in previous advertisements in the *Chicago Defender*, this illustration was solid decay back into the minstrel and coon stereotypes. Meanwhile, it also inherited the humorous exterior of blackface minstrel shows which black patrons also laughed at heartily. Though black consumers might enjoy minstrels in a complete mindset to white audiences, it did not matter to entertainment enterprises such as phonograph companies as long as it was lucrative. The stereotypical but funny advertising illustrations probably did not offend lower-class black patrons (the main consumer market of blues records) as much as it did elite and middle-class blacks, as other companies quickly followed OKeh's lead to utilize comic incarnations in their advertisements for vaudeville blues.

OKeh's first attempt of adopting comic illustrations as sales stimulants for vaudeville blues in the *Chicago Defender* caricatured racist minstrel/coon imagery of black people. But the singer of this record, Mamie Smith, escaped from such caricature as this advertisement did not present her photo or sketch as before. Omitting a direct caricature of the singer herself could be a cautious probe that OKeh's advertising department put for testing black patrons' tolerance of black stereotypes as to avoid further offense. The comparison between two variants of advertising illustrations of "Lonesome Mama Blues" in 1922 could serve as an elaborative example. On June 03 OKeh advertised the instrumental performance of "Lonesome Mama Blues" by a white orchestra via an animated image of squat-shaped "Mammy" in bandanna kerchief and polka-dot dress (figure 32). Her tearful eyes were hard to tell compared with her

exaggerated big mouth and coal-black hands holding a handkerchief and a frying pan. In comparison, the advertisement of OKeh 4630 (figure 33) on July 08, Mamie Smith's vocal cover of the same song, presented her "standard" studio head photo of refined style which was used in advertisements of her milestone hit "Crazy Blues." In a word, OKeh was much more careful in treating the images of blueswomen themselves even as the pioneer to use "funny sheets" in terms of advertising in the black press.

OKeh's advertisements in 1922 that presented the images of vaudeville blueswomen all depicted vaudeville blues women singers in the urban fashion trend, mostly via polished studio photos, although it had obviously started its comic cartoon advertising campaign.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, in 1924 Paramount announced its grand blues star, the "discovered-at-last" Ma Rainey's first recording "Moonshine Blues" via an animated sketch (figure 39) of more "downhome" fashion. This full-page advertisement provided a vivid half-length portrait of Ma Rainey, delineating in detail her "homely" face, such as small eyes, and flat but wide nose, as well as her wiry and fluffy hair, and gaudy jewelry including the famous necklace made of gold coins that earned her the title of "gold neck" as the textual description indicated. Compared with the obvious efforts of preceding advertisements to "dignify" female vaudeville blues singers, Paramount's attitude

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<sup>16</sup> Among the approximately 50 advertisements OKeh distributed via the *Chicago Defender*, the images of three vaudeville blueswomen were presented: Mamie Smith, Edith Wilson and Lizzie Miles. All of them but one was real photoshoots, featuring these women hair stylishly done and fine accessories like earrings and necklaces. The only exception was the ad for "'Oh Mamie!' 'I've Got the Mamie Smith Blues,'" the word and music of which Mamie herself had contributed to. This ad possibly portrayed a cartoonish incarnation of Mamie Smith telling from the similar hairdo with her photo in other OKeh ads. Her face was whitened but her arms and legs were blackened. However, in the context of the identically caricatured male orchestra members, she was still depicted in a considerably refined disposition via her outfit and the feather fan in her hand. See figure 34-38.

revealed in this display was more complicated: it emphasized Ma Rainey's big mouth, thick lips and the mole on her left cheek but whitened her dark skin. This coincidence of overstatement and understatement of racial characteristics in the image of Ma Rainey seemed to indicate the uncertainty, diffidence, and uneasiness of the manufacturers on the presentation of racial stereotypes in promotional stimulants against black consumers. After all, sales depended heavily on advertisements due to new competing releases of blues records every week, whereas they were still experimenting on the partiality of the market for the imagery of female singers of its own race.

Paramount's debut sketch of Ma Rainey resembled her on aspects of her countenance, heavily-built shape as well as her taste of clothing and accessories to a great degree. Nonetheless, it was not hard to animate a more flashy or urbane archetypical photo of "the only blues singer in the world elevated to the heights of 'Madame'," as the very ad praised her so. A widely circulated studio group shot of Ma Rainey and her band taken around 1924 to 1925 featured her in a diva-like style via her glittering sequin dress, beaded headband, and the feather fan in her hand (figure 40). Less urbanely fashionable figure as she was, this outfit would place her more identical with the other fur-coated blueswomen mounted in the same roster of Paramount's "most famous blues singers" on the aspect of style (figure 41). In a sense, Paramount tailored the advertisement of "Moonshine Blues" including the image of Ma Rainey to be "downhome," as affirmed by the rural scene that features a melancholic man sitting on the fence of a plantation field under the moonshine of three gloomy human-face incarnated moons. This sketch was elaborately carved with no doubt, and Paramount must take pride in this cartoonish illustration of Ma Rainey since it reoccurred in a great number of advertisements of her

later recordings in the *Chicago Defender*. Paramount might have felt it was appropriate to depict Ma Rainey in a less urbane fashion as her voice was more downhome compared with the sweeter and smoother voices of Mamie Smith and Ethel Waters.

Correspondingly, the very song “Moonshine Blues” narrated a mistreated woman’s determination to “catch the first south bound train to ride back home again.” In the context of migration callers’ (like the *Chicago defender*) picturing the North as “the promised land” for better opportunities and living conditions to lure people out of the South, this song talked about disheartened immigrants longing for returning to the South to “settle down.” Whether the persona took it seriously or not, this imagined nostalgia of the south as the land symbolizing familiarity and stability offered a temporary emotional escape from the migration’s promise that fell short. According to Mark Dolan, references to the South appeared in 148 song titles, in ad narratives, and in the performers’ names throughout the decade (Dolan 108), which formed a collective memory to relegate African Americans to the South notwithstanding imaged mostly by the manufacturers of commercial vaudeville blues. In this sense, the less city-slick image of Ma Rainey, a well-established vaudeville blues shouter in the South, apparently fit into this nostalgic scene.

The white recording labels might find themselves confused by and lost in the question of black patrons’ partiality between dignified presentation and funny but offensive depictions in terms of advertising illustrations. However, to the majority of its lower-class black consumers, the blues was a collective narrator of their shared personal experiences. As regard to vaudeville blues, if the luxurious costumes and rich accessories on these blues women singers in the ads symbolized social status and economic uplift the



working-class black community would like to achieve, the cartoonish part of many ads, which often incarnated the characters or stories in the lyrics, revealed the present life of the singer and her fellows of the black working-class communities in the 1920s, from a black woman's perspective in particular.

To a people who used to be enslaved, travel has been a salient theme of real-life experiences. The abolition of slavery in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had enhanced the mass mobility of African Americans in general. The later 1920s witnessed millions of black people leaving the South and rushing into western and northern cities like Chicago and New York to fill in the shortage of labor notwithstanding harsh exploitation and segregation in the ostensible "promised land." As the first musical commodity targeting exclusively black patrons, vaudeville blues touched upon the imaginary theme of travel prevalently. Nonetheless, gender differences enacted in terms of autonomous movement owing to the dominant ideology of gender division regardless of identical legitimate freedom of both sexes. Black women did not enjoy an equal access to "the road" as black men did, but remained "territorially confined" (Davis 68) out of domestic requirements of childcare and household maintenance in their majority. The ad of Trixie Smith's "Freight Train Blues" (figure 42) elaborates on black women's "confined access" to mobility. In this ad, a poor black woman is kneeling on the ground, begging the brakeman, who is situated higher, on the train, to let her ride the train. The railroad/ the train, as a crucial designator to travel or mobility, had been "a symbol of power, of freedom, of escape" (Oliver 58) to African Americans ever since slavery. In the tide of the Great Migration, the symbolic became reality as trains took numerous blacks males northward and westward. The female persona also feels the spirited appeal of the train when singing

I hate to hear that engine blow, boo-hoo,  
I hate to hear that engine blow, boo-hoo,  
Every time I hear it blowing, I feel like riding too.

However, “the mean cruel brakeman won’t even let her ride the blind,” as the text of the ad indicates. As a result, she ends up with being restrained to her room, the “proper sphere” assigned to women by the society:

When a woman gets the blues, she goes to her room and hides,  
When a woman gets the blues, she goes to her room and hides,  
But when a man gets the blues, he catches a freight train and rides.

It was the unequal access to the “road” that pushed black women like the female persona back to “her room to hide” and cry when she felt blue, whereas a man could “catch a freight train and rides” when he got the blues. Her hatred toward the blowing engine could stem from her anger with and frustration against the patriarchal society that limited her freedom of mobility.

Beyond the confined mobility of black women in the Great Migration, vaudeville blues also chanted on their mental sufferings on occasions of being left behind by their men who went northward. The cartoonish ad featuring Ida Cox’s famous migration blues “Chicago Bound Blues,” (figure 43) which was also covered by Bessie Smith, can be a perfect example to depict the moaning of abandoned black women. In this cartoon, a man with a packed luggage is standing next to a board “to Chicago” with a bursting flying-away gesture, while the woman knelt on the floor, like that in figure 42 (freight train blues), also begging, not for a ride on the train but for her man not to leave. “I’d follow my daddy, but my feet refuse to walk,” as the female persona of the song grieves. Her kneeling position with both arms reaching to the leaving man suggests her weakness, the reason of which that bounds her freedom remains uncovered. Nonetheless, she is bold

enough to blame “the old fireman” and “the cruel engineer” for taking her man away but leaving her behind just like the woman in figure 42. These repeated presentations of being abandoned in her desire to migrate to the North mirrored the shared experiences of many black women down South during the Great Migration. Whether the creators of these ads cared about black women’s sufferings or not, these outspoken and bold presentations of women’s sorrow and moaning over being abandoned publicized the voices of those “left-behind” black women in the South in the Migration, revealing their sacrifices and mental sufferings from a women’s point of view while black men migrated to the North to seek for a better future. Interpretations of these advertisements never aim to certify that the white copywriters created the ads out of feminist mindset to stimulate female patronization nor that the *Defender* carried the ads due to their implicit criticism of the patriarchal society. Nevertheless, an advertisement about a woman being abandoned and/or denied the option of riding the train was able to stir resonance within the women’s blues community, especially among female audience, as an explicit reminder of the chained mobility of women. Moreover, through the dissemination such songs and advertisements, the message of blaming the chained mobility of women on the “mean cruel brakeman/fireman/engineer” as representatives of a patriarchal society might slip into people’s minds so as to facilitate a feminist consciousness.

But not every black woman who yearned for mobility was hindered by “weak feet” or a “mean” freight train. The female vaudeville blues singers themselves were among the best examples of women who disengaged themselves from the social constraints of domesticity and enjoyed the freedom of travel. The self-initiated and independent travel of black women was also an important theme of female vaudeville

singers' blues. Ma Rainey's self-identified favorite song was "Traveling Blues" (Sidran 24) which dramatizes the traveling experiences of black women. Victoria Spivey's "No. 12 Let Me Roam" tells "how a woman feels about leaving home" as the advertising text claims. The third stanza presents the changing mood of the female persona:

Baby all night long, I cannot help myself,  
Baby all night long, I cannot help myself,  
Don't keep tryin' to return, I find I've got somebody else.

She starts with moaning over being deserted by her lover who went away with Train no.

12 but ends with warning him not to try to return as she has moved on. In

correspondence, the comic cartoon (figure 44) depicts a woman dressed as a sexy "roaring twenties" fashion trendsetter, with a cloche hat over her bobbed hair, V-neck tight dress, stockings, and high heels, leaving home with a piece of luggage. Judging from her facial expression, she goes on her way with a light heart and confidence, waving a carefree goodbye to a sobbing man even though he kneels and pleads for her to stay. The scene of abandoning the returned man could be realistic or merely imaginative. But her claim of making him to "do what mama says" if they meet again is a bold exclamation to discipline her male partner, the traditional superior party in heterosexual intimacy of the time.

You left me wrong, but I' ll be right someday,  
You left me wrong, but I' ll be right someday,  
If we meet again, he's gotta to do what mama say.

This image of a woman that overcomes her sadness, breaks through the bounds of domesticity, and takes the initiative to claim the road, leaving her man behind but keeping a possibility to tame and discipline him in the future journey of life, challenged the passive and secondary role of women in relationships in the mainstream culture in the

early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, to leave home and hit the road for “someone else” out of her own will, instead of following her ex-lover, confirms women’s autonomy over their own lives. According to Blues and feminist scholar Angela Davis, the imagery of black women engaged in self-initiated and independent travel in the blues music “constitutes a significant moment of ideological opposition to the prevailing assumptions about women’s place in society” (Davis 67). Whether these female personas’ choice of autonomic travel leads as far as to “a quest for liberation or not” (67), it creates a model of black women with independence, determination, and agency over their own lives.

For black women left-behind, moaning could only be a mental venue of expressing their frustration and desperation. To leave, or to throw oneself into the migration tide could be the option for some. But there were still plenty of women that had to stay and survive to support themselves economically by working as domestic workers and also domestically as caregivers of the children, the elderly, and the rest of the family. Bessie Smith’s “Washwoman’s Blues” laments on how a washwoman’s body aches from head down to shins from washing dirty clothes to make her livelihood. On occasions of natural catastrophes, they themselves were the one to depend on. “Back-Water Blues” written and recorded by Bessie Smith in 1927 recorded such crisis from a black woman’s perspective. The ad of “Back-Water Blues,” one of Bessie Smith’s biggest hits, on the *Chicago Defender* in 1927 (figure 45) featured a woman in such a crisis, probably the Mississippi flood in 1927, one of the greatest natural disasters in the history of the United States.<sup>17</sup> The flood started with heavy rain in the summer of 1926, swallowing the

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<sup>17</sup> Scholar David Evans questioned the indelible association in the popular mind with the great flood of the Mississippi River whose major events occurred from April to June

Mississippi's tributaries in Kansas and Iowa by September and destroying many black communities as the cartoonish ad indicates. Bessie Smith wrote the following stanza to describe the trials and tribulations of people suffering from the flood:

Backwater blues done call me to pack my things and go,  
Backwater blues done call me to pack my things and go,  
'Cause my house fell down and I can't live there no more.

In accordance, the ad depicts a large black woman sitting in a small rowing boat in a flood, looking at the floating houses and debris around her in panic. It is apparent that she has been driven out of her house by the flood suddenly, as the littering suitcase in her hand and the bucket of household items are obviously packed in haste. and a bird cage in the other, and a bucket of household items like clocks and canned food, with a stereotypical polka-dot headkerchief like a mammy, a lattice blouse, and an apron. On the one hand, the black woman is still stereotypically illustrated with stock frightened expression beyond her typical mammy apparel one often finds in a minstrel sheet music cover such as a polka-dot headkerchief, a lattice blouse and an apron. On the other hand, she is presented as independent, reliable, and capable enough to get herself and her little horrified bird into a small boat with her few necessities like a clock and canned food, instead of just panicking and waiting for assistance like a bird in the cage. Even though

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1927, as “Back-Water Blues” was recorded in February 1927, in his article Bessie Smith’s ““Back-Water Blues’: the story behind the song.” Nevertheless, as localized flooding had already occurred as early as December 1926, Bessie Smith could have experienced or heard enough about the floods to write this song. In essence, it does matter whether the song refers to the Great Mississippi Floods of 1927 or not. The perfect coincidence of its release date with major levee breaks along the Mississippi river in April of 1927, which made the flood a national catastrophe, as well as the resonating lyrics of the song, had well placed it as the milestone flood blues in the history of African American music.

biased and stereotypical views designated by the stock “mammy” image are still mingled on the presentation of black women in such circumstances, the independence of black women can also be detected by readers with similar experiences.

Compared with women left behind by their men who went up northward for jobs, vaudeville blues provide even more presentations of women abandoned by men just out of relationship problems. Just like issues of travel, problems of intimate relationships were also a prevailing theme of the blues music in the 1920s. In contrast to the “idealized nonsexual depictions of heterosexual love relationships” (Davis 3) in popular songs of the mainstream culture of the time, vaudeville blues was much more realistic, portraying non-romanticized and conflicting troubles and issues in relationship, such as maltreatment, abandonment, betrayal, multiple sexual partners, and even subjects like domestic violence and homosexuality that middle class culture considered as taboos. To take Ida Cox’s “Mean Loving Man Blues” as an example, the female persona’s lover is anything but an idealized partner. As the lyrics narrates:

My man dranked his whiskey and is as mean as can be,  
My man dranked his whiskey and is as mean as can be,  
But when he starts lovin', Lord, he's so good to me.

The lyrics do not elaborate on the details of the maltreatment from her man.

Nevertheless, the affiliated cartoonish advertisement (figure 46) features a typical scene of domestic violence: a man in front of a fallen chair is ferociously pulling the hair of a poor woman who already kneels on the ground. His hideous face, the loose tie, wrinkled suits and two whiskey bottles, one in his pocket and the other lying on the table, all indicate the state of his intoxication. The man’s caricature was most possibly produced by men in advertising departments of white recording labels on the basis of a stereotypical

black male addicted to alcoholism and violence. Nevertheless, domestic abuse did exist physically and/or psychologically and vaudeville blues songs like “Mean Loving Man Blues” were one of the few arenas that touched upon such matters, in particular from a woman’s perspective, hence it offers a rare venue for the maltreated women to have voice out their experiences and suffering notwithstanding the prevailing stereotypical images interwoven in the process.

Beyond caricaturing the black man as an aggressive drunkard, the cartoon ad of “Mean Loving Man” pictured the abused woman as vulnerable and submissive designated by her kneeling position and wailing facial expressions. On the one hand, this vulnerable image accords to a certain degree with that of the female persona in the lyrics who claims she is stilling waiting for the command of such a mean lover. However, compared with the former’s vulnerability and inferiority in front of her maltreating man, the latter makes a sober declaration of her addiction to the mean waywardness of her man while moaning over it:

It ain't when he kisses me, ain't when he tries to frown.  
It ain't when he kisses me, it ain't when he tries to frown.  
But it's the way he dogs and drags me around.

Her independent and free will over choosing such a bad lover claims her comparatively “higher” lever of subjectivity over her own intimate partnership than the flat wailing female character in the cartoon ad. On the other hand, her submissive characterization is further compromised by the contrast from the royal honorific of to the singer Ida Cox. Dressed and jeweled in diva fashion in the half-length shot of Ida Cox, the extravagant image of the “uncrowned queen” herself is a signifier of confidence that undercuts the



imposed inferiority of women in relationship as represented by the wailing woman in the ad and the moaning autobiographical female persona of the song.

While the above female personas moaning over their wayward or vanished lovers, some others presented by classic blues women via their songs are already alert before their men are gone. Ida Cox's "'Fore Day Blues" is blunt enough on the untrustworthy on men's loyalty:

I'm gonna buy me a bulldog to watch my man while he sleeps,  
I'm gonna buy me a bulldog to watch my man while he sleeps,  
Men are so dog-gone crooked, afraid he might make a 'fore day creep.

The female persona asserts the necessity of watching her man in sleep in case that he may creep out to meet with other lovers. Correspondingly, the accompanying cartoon ad (figure 47) depicts a man sleeping soundly in bed while a bulldog is watching him with eyes wide-open on a chair next to the bed. With no doubt such cartoonish caricaturing of the watching bulldog plot is attractively humorous. The advertising text confirms the correctness of such hilarious behavior via affirming that "she has the right idea," which adds upon on the humorous temperament of the song as well as enhancing the image of vaudeville blues women who "know men well." At the same time, this universal designation of men reflects the recognition of unfaithful partners in relationships, especially black men, since this ad and the music were targeted at a black audience which was regarded as sexually "impure" by the mainstream culture. Ma Rainey's "Soon This Morning Blues" is another example that acknowledges betrayals in relationship. Upset with her cheating man, the female persona catches him "making his gateway" out of their house:

Soon this morning, just about the break of day,  
Soon this morning, just about the break of day,

I caught my good man making his getaway.

The ad for this song on the *Chicago Defender* (figure 48) depicted a man slipping out from the window at sunrise, suiting up with hat and tie and his doctor's bag, all packed up to leave his woman who caught him sneaking out just in time. No wonder these female personas feel and sing the blues! Remorseful as they are, however, they "know" men enough to keep an eye on them (or have a dog watch them) even in sleeping. These cruel but realistic portrayal of unfaithful partners in the blues music as reflected in the ads cried out at black women's anger towards mistreating men. Although the portrayal of the "unfaithfulness" in relationships in the songs and ads conformed to the middle-class values of the blues as a "lowdown" and "dirty" music that decays "right living," it somewhat alerted women of the imperfections in relationships as an opposition to the idealized imagery of intimate love in the contemporary established popular musical culture.

Compared with the mostly heterosexual partnership between men and women in vaudeville blues, relationships among women presented by vaudeville blueswomen are much more multifarious and complicated. They could be rivalry, advisors, and even homosexual lovers to each other. Jealousy and competitiveness defined female blues subjects' attitudes toward other women crucially such as in Ma Rainey's "Jealous Hearted Blues."

You can have my money and everything I own,  
But for God's sakes, leave my man alone,  
'Cause I'm jealous, jealous hearted me,  
Lord, I'm just jealous, jealous as I can be.

The female persona names her jealousy boldly and repeatedly, expressing her willingness to give up her possession including money to other rivals as long as they stay away from

her man. Such “willingness” could be a begging or a warning just telling from the lyrics of the quoted stanza above. Jealous hearted as she is, the female persona also announces the necessity to buy a bulldog to prevent her partner from “midnight creep.” But nothing in detail about the rivals themselves is mentioned. In contrast, the cartoon ad gives a much more intricate and violent interpretation of a “jealous” scenario (figure 49): a raging heavy shaped darker woman in a coarse kitchen-style dress leaning on a broken window, her hand raised in the air with something like a mop or a cleaning brush, attempts to attack another stylish and slender lighter-skinned woman in a stylish coat trimmed with fur, a cloche hat and high heels who puts her arm on the elbow of a suited-up man. The advertising text below the cartoon defines the rivals as the “shebas,” designating women of lighter skin and slenderer figure as represented by the rival with whom the man leaves with. Her victory could be an explicit designation of greater desirability of lighter skin tone and high social and economic stratum on the basis of middle-class values and aesthetics. Such prioritizing of social stratification by skin color and class would possibly gain support from advertising platforms such as black newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* that run ads for “skin lighteners and beautifiers” (Tracy: 2001, 200) and praised the respectability of middle-class Southern Belles. However, the lyrics of the song itself do not touch upon the privileges of the rivals that makes the persona jealous. Its focus lies in the female persona’s feelings, including her desire toward her man to have him turn her damper down and in the repetitiously expressed jealousy. In fact, references abound in blues lyrics to the superiority of lighter skin tone often based on either the individual color or the preferences of the singer of the song (201). Moreover, the superiority of bourgeois over proletariat was rarely traced in

vaudeville blues songs in the 1920s. Even songs like Bessie Smith's "Poor Man's Blues" that deals with the demarcation between rich and poor is dedicated to claim "poor man must live the same as rich man does," which is more of a request of social and economic equalization instead of prioritizing the rich over the poor. In other words, vaudeville blueswomen's songs leaned to the expressiveness of their individual problems in a communal setting attended by both the singer and the audience. Despite being criticized as "apolitical" due to the absence of explicit social protest sometimes, vaudeville blues presented a group of black women who devoted themselves to publicizing their personal difficulties, consciously or unconsciously, which could already be "political," while not conforming to the prevailing notions of colorist and class supremacy held by both black and white middle class.

Beyond the demarcation of skin tone and class of black women, the cartoonish ad of "Jealous Hearted Blues" also caricatures the "jealousy" of the female persona into violent aggressiveness via the attacking position of the darker and poorer woman.

Although the song lyrics themselves just moans over a jealous heart without mentioning further actions, some other vaudeville blues songs do offer cases of violence against the traitor or the rivals. For example, the female persona in Priscilla Stewart's "Mr. Freddie Blues" decides to track and shoot her beloved Mr. Freddie as he won't behave:

I'm gonna buy me a bloodhound and leave this lonesome town,  
I'm gonna spend the rest of my life running my Freddie down.

I love my Freddie, but he just won't behave,  
I'm gonna buy me a shotgun and put him in a lonesome grave.

The affiliated cartoon ad (figure 50) depicts a black man dressed up in his suit, cap, and cane, walking between two black women attired fashionably in fur coat, clothe hats, and

high heels while a line of women in similar style follow them. In the left corner another black woman, the incarnation of the angry female persona, is presented as holding a shot gun in one hand and the collar of barking bloodhound in the other, implying her determination to put the misbehaving womanizer in a grave as the lyrics demonstrates. While she charges her fury against the unfaithful man, the female persona in Ma Rainey's "Rough Tumble Blues" chooses to attack other female rivals:

I got rough and killed three women ' fore the police got the news,  
I got rough and killed three women ' fore police got the news,  
'Cause mama's on the warpath with those rough and tumble blues.

The cartoonish ad of this song (figure 51) features a rough woman chasing, beating, and mauling the "little devils," three women who get on her man's road while the man is so scared that his hat flies off. Such imagery of black women as aggressive and violent enhanced the "Sapphire" stereotype of black women as "rude, loud, malicious, stubborn, and overbearing"<sup>18</sup> to a certain degree. But meanwhile, their domineering and aggressive gestures were also a heavy blow on the stock images of a passive and secondary role of women in relationships, no matter what intentions copywriters had when they created those ads. Instead, they stood out, argued with other women about their rights, claiming the agency over the relationship instead of being a timid subordinate of men.

Vaudeville blues depicted black women's turning to violence out of jealousy, but with no doubt violence was not the exclusive resolution of all women. The vast repertoire of women's blues provided various state-of-minds and different reactions of women in bad relationships, which was also reflected in the accompanying advertisements. As the songs discussed above reveal, black women moaned, watched, or even tried to kill their

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<sup>18</sup> See <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/antiblack/sapphire.htm>

unfaithful partners, Clara Smith's "Mean Papa Turn in Your Key" talks about a gal named May who has "murder in her eye" against her trifling man but refrains herself from bloodthirst, ending up with driving the man out:

Mean papa, turn in your key,  
You don't live here no more.  
Mean papa, just let me be,  
Stay away from my door.

The advertising cartoon (figure 52) depicts an angry black woman pointing her hand at the cowardly incarnated man in a plaid suit. Her coal-black face, kinky hair, and berating position that scares the man into trembling shaped her as a caricature of the "minstrel black Sapphire." Though stereotypically presented as aggressive and emasculating, she defends her subjectivity in relationship via asking the "mean papa" to hand in his key to her door, thus reverses the subordination of women to men in relationships in the ideology of a patriarchal society by prioritizing of women's decisions before those of men.

Vaudeville blues does not only record black women's differentiated reactions to their mistreating partners but also notes down their various ways to cope with rivals. While some of the female personas in vaudeville songs threaten or even beat or kill other female rivals, some others mingle warnings to potential or actual rivals with advisory to the community of women. To take an example, Ida Cox's "Fore Day Creep" starts with the female persona's admonishment against rivals by warning them:

When you lose your good man please don't mess with mine;

whereas it ends with advising "girls" in general:

Any woman's a fool who thinks she's got a whole man by herself.

While she claims her sovereignty over her partner via buying a bulldog to watch him sleep in addition to warning other rivals to stay away, she announces the “untrustworthy nature” of men to all women which includes her potential rivals. Regretfully, such paradoxical mindset of women against her female peers was not present in the advertising cartoon to this song; however, the ad for another blues song by Ida Cox, “Don’t blame me” offered a dramatized incarnation. Unlike songs on jealousy of women, this song stands at the point of view of a “rival” who defends her victory of winning a man from other women:

Don’t blame me if I got what will satisfy him,  
You don’t blame a duck just because he wants to swim.  
Now he offered me a car, he offered me a flat,  
I’d be a dame fool if I didn’t take that.  
But I did not cause your misery,  
So, you are out of love, sister, don’t blame me.

This stanza sounds like a shameless flaunt of her sexual prowess that wins the man. But in the following two stanzas she devotes her mind to advise the poor abandoned sister on how to tame a man instead of crying uselessly. Correspondingly, the affiliated advertising cartoon (figure 53) depicts a weeping woman with a handkerchief in her hand in the right upper corner, looking toward her man leaving with another girl. Sarcastically, only the female rival who “steals” her man turns back to look backward to her, whereas the man looks straightforward with a smile, indicating his eagerness for a new life with the new partner. She is not apologetic about the “theft” of some other woman’s man, but she shows a sympathetic attitude toward the poor competitor, and thus offers various advice to her as well as other women who may have the same experience. These songs together with the ads present various mindsets of women in competition for the same partner, ranging from warning and jealousy to rivals, moaning over their failure, to the winner’s

self-defense and even advice to all other women cater to a wide range of female audiences in the women's blues community with different individual experiences. Natural competitors in intimate relationship as they are, their empathy and sympathy to each other via advisory to potential or actual rivals allude to "a possibility of sisterhood and solidarity that is forged in and through struggles around sexuality" (Davis 53).

The competition among women over the same partner, whether victory or failure, may enhance the stereotype of black Jezebel, an enduring stereotype that defines black women as lascivious, worldly, and innately promiscuous. In this sense, the female persona in "Don't Blame me," who tempts the man thus is offered a car and a flat, fits exactly into the "Jezebel" stereotype. Just like her, vaudeville blues has always posed an unapologetic attitude toward the straightforwardness of in the expressions of women's secular desire, in particular sexuality. Double entendre lines referring to sexuality implicitly (such as "turn my damper down" in "Jealous Hearted Blues") or explicitly (Such as "when he starts loving, he's so good to me" in "Mean Loving Man Blues") prevail in the lyrics of women's blues. To take another example, Bessie Smith's "Hustling Dan" talks about the sexual satisfaction the female persona gets from her man:

Talk about your lovers, he could more than satisfy me,  
Master of my weakness, everything a man could be,  
Hustling' Dan, oh, he's my man.

Calling him "everything a man could be", she might refer to a wider range of virtues this man has that "master her weakness," among which his sexual ability stands out, telling from her double entendre exclamation that "he could more than satisfy me." Anyway, this song is actually an oral condolence to the female person's man Dan, a rough and tumble gambler and hustler, as she claims her readiness for love-pact suicide over Dan's



death from T.B.. Nevertheless, the Columbia's cartoonish ad (figure 54) accompanied this song only highlights her satisfaction via the depiction of a black couple apparently in foreplay position on a sofa. The open legs of the woman indicate her enjoyment as confirmed by the reiterating exclamation of her sexual satisfaction above the couple. On the one hand, the image of black women as sexual beings expressing their pleasure in sensuality and sexuality, as presented by vaudeville blues songs and further emphasized by the affiliated cartoonish advertisements coming into play, may aggravate the "Jezebel" imprint on them. On the other hand, such bold exclamation of black women's sensual pleasure in both verbal and visual terms undoubtedly underline the subjectivity and assertiveness with regards to their sexuality, "reclaiming female sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire" (Carby 479).

Vaudeville blueswomen sang about sexual blues on women's sexuality, but their desirous objects were not just men. Though heterosexual partnership was still the majority, vaudeville blues provides a rare but privileged space for women to express homosexuality in the public sphere. Ma Rainey who never concealed her lesbian intimacy with women, self-composed a song called "Prove it on Me Blues" which declared the female persona's unabashed sexual interest in women in the narration of her homosexual intercourse:

Where she went, I don't know  
I mean to follow everywhere she goes;  
Folks say I'm crooked. I didn't know where she took it  
I want the whole world to know

They say I do it, ain't nobody caught me  
Sure got to prove it on me;  
Went out last night with a crowd of my friends  
They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men

As the female personal claims her sexual preference for women over men, its advertisements on the *Chicago Defender* (figure 55) caricatures a large woman, incarnating the singer and composer Ma Rainey herself telling from her appearance and figure, flirting with two slender women at the street corner while a white male policeman is watching them across the street. She is attired like a butch, wearing a collar and tie, tailored suit jacket, and hat and vest of men's wear style compared with the two slender women in femme drag of fur-trimmed coats, above-knee skirts and high heels. Nonetheless, the matching skirt instead of pants and high heels reveal her feminine nature, suggesting her rejection of being an absolute duplicate of the "male" character while romancing with other women. Even under a white policeman's suspicious gaze across the street, her relaxed smile and confident disposition with one hand on her waist indicate her enjoyment of the homosexual flirtation and dauntlessness against what the ad's text calls "a scandal," in correspondence with the provocation of "Sure got to prove it on me" in the lyrics. The declaration that "I want the whole world to know," as she boasts in the song, is a proud affirmation of lesbian self-worth and defiance. Though condemned by the mainstream society as "crooked," the public articulation of lesbianism in vaudeville blues challenges the orthodox rigidity of women's exclusive sexual experience with men thus asserts women's sexual independence and autonomy.

Vaudeville blues in the 1920s elaborated on the individual experiences, sentiments, and mindsets of working-class black women under the ongoing and unprecedented historical background of migration and urbanization of the black population in a public and communal ritual via widely circulated recordings. Centered on universal blues themes such as alienation and loneliness, pleasure and hardships in

everyday life and intimate relationships from a female perspective, women's vaudeville blues created an alternative model of black women who were "wild" with "rambling minds," the best example of which would be the female persona of Ida Cox's "Wild Women Don't Have the Blues":

I 've got a disposition and a way of my own,  
When My man starts to kicking I let him find a new home,  
I get full of good liquor, walk the street all night,  
Go home and put my man out if he don't act right.  
Wild women don't worry,  
Wild women don't have the blues.

Caricatured as an independent woman who has control over her liquor, home, and mobility, she rejects the concurrent prevailing norms of womanhood that honored women's domesticity and submission, asserting her subjectivity and independency via "a disposition and a way of her own." This imagery of "wild women" are virtually synonymous with the nonconforming and independent blues queens themselves, according to Angela Davis (Davis 38). Their physical presence with regal attires and jewels accessories together with their bold embracement of black women's sensuality and sexuality in a public sphere via singing vaudeville blues empowered them as financially independent, sexually assertive, and spiritually autonomous figures that challenged gender-based inferiority. Just like the female persona above who sings a blues song about "wild women don't have the blues," vaudeville blueswomen, as representatives of "wild women," do have the blues and sing the blues. Through singing the blues of "wild women," they achieved a disposition and a way of their own, thus constructed an alternative black womanhood, which deviated from that of black middle class denying black women's sexual agency to defend their moral integrity and sexual purity,

presenting black women as “more assertive, sexy, sexually aware, independent, realistic, complex, alive” (Harrison 111).

“Since the era of slavery, music—and essentially singing—has given black women the greatest range of style, sensibilities, and opportunities,” as claimed by cultural critic Margo Jefferson in “Who Says Wild Women Don’t Sing the Blues” (Jefferson 28). However, until 1920 did black women, as pioneers of professional black entertainers, finally gain admittance to the phonograph industry to fulfill the thirst of the shockingly lucrative black consumer market for vaudeville blues. With the rise and fall of the short-lived black-owned label Black Swan, the booming race record industry that made most profit out of blues records, in particular women’s vaudeville blues records from 1923 to 1926, fell into the hands of white-owned recording labels like Okeh, Columbia, and Paramount. Though often written by professional songwriters, black and white, female and male, and recorded as commercial commodities aiming at black patrons, vaudeville blues delivered by black women singers still represented a distinct female interpretation of black migration and urbanization.

Due to the fierce competition among race record labels which released new recordings every week, sales of records depended heavily on advertisements, motivating all record companies to explore and invest on various advertising strategies. As Jeff Titon claims, “advertisements are a particular rich source of information about how people are perceived and the directions in which they are pushed” (Titon 219). The history of black images in the history of American advertising has been a history of prejudice and stereotypes since slavery era. From skilled salable or dangerous or promiscuous runaway slaves, kitchen mummies like Aunt Jemima, to minstrel coons, the imagery of black

people were defined as either obedient and servile, or comic but simple-minded, or rude and savage, catering to the stereotypical white minds as the majority recipients. Nevertheless, when African Americans were targeted as patrons of recording selling, advertising commercial blues records on widespread black newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* became “dancing with chains,” since white copywriters of advertising departments were faced with a music and a market of consumers that they were not sure about but definitely did not wish to offend so as to drive away the potential buyers. Therefore, the ads of vaudeville blues by female singers in the black press revealed their careful attempts to honor the lately crowned blues queens in the orthodox of advertising opera divas, while simultaneously dramatizing the lyrics of these songs via humorous depictions such as comic cartoonish incarnations. The cartoonish dramatizations of the songs by female vaudeville blues singers in the ads adhere closely to the contents of the songs, presenting individualized experiences of black women vividly without incorporating too much deep-seated racism, though primary stereotypes caricaturing black women as Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel still prevailed.

As a crucial black newspaper that reached a large and wide black population both North and South, the *Chicago Defender* played a principal role in circulating and disseminating numerous advertisements of vaudeville blues records among black consumers in the 1920s before the Depression hit the industry. Practically every entertainment section featured two or three ads of “wild women’s blues”, juxtaposed with editorial content that promoted musical success through industry, frugality, and moral living (Dolan 107). It was understandable for those sketch ads featuring vaudeville blues women singers in respectable diva fashion, which conformed to the advertising means of

“high-art” forms such as opera, to appear in the *Chicago Defender* since it promoted the sales of concerts and orchestras by black artists. However, it was hard to explain why the *Chicago Defender*, whose motto was “American Race Prejudice Must Be Prejudiced” (Suggs 24), would agree to carry cartoonish ads, most of which portrayed the “debased” and “lowdown” aspects of black life except for economic reasons. It did not have other options, anyway, as the advertising department of most recording companies were white, with or without black consultancy, whose racist and sexist gaze would probably enhance the controversy of images of black women portrayed in the lyrics. The *Chicago Defender*’s resistance to the urban-decayed black imagery was conveyed via silent neglect: it rarely wrote about vaudeville blueswomen in the paper. Nevertheless, these ads were of historical importance and researching value as “striking evidence of the music’s popularity, and a guide to trends and reputation within the industry.”<sup>19</sup> As an indispensable section of the “yellowed press-cuttings” that remained of the Vaudeville Blues besides old recordings according to Paul Oliver’s remark in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, these ads are an important supplemental archive to the sociological and historical research on the influences of the female vaudeville singers’ blues. Released and disseminated alongside with the revolting vaudeville blues songs, they present images of black women with independence, self-affirmation, sexual prowess and agency over their lives even in pain and sufferings, despite that such presentations never escaped from the prevailing degenerating stereotypes of black women. The ambiguity and complexity of the imagery of black women they preserve carve out an ambivalent space, not intentionally but accidentally, that may invite conscious feminist

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<sup>19</sup> <https://elijahwald.com/chidef.html>

interpretations thus assert long-lasting influence on African American music and literature.

## CHAPTER 3

### EVERYONE HAS HIS OWN SONG: MA RAINEY AND AUGUST WILSON

#### 3.1 “She jes’ gits Hold of us Dataway:” Ma Rainey and African American Literature

##### II

Dey comes to hear Ma Rainey from de little river settlements,  
From blackbottom cornrows and from lumber camps;  
Dey stumble in de hall, jes a-laughin’ an’ a-cacklin’,  
Cheerin’ lak roarin’ water, lak wind in river swamps.

...

##### IV

I talked to a fellow, an’ the fellow say,  
“She jes’ catch hold of us, somekindaway.

...

Dere wasn’t much more de fellow say:  
She jes’ gits hold of us dataway.

-- Sterling A. Brown, “Ma Rainey,” 1932.

...

I’m going to cry so sweet  
& so low  
& so dangerous,  
Ma,  
that the message is going to reach you  
back in 1922  
where you shimmer  
snaggle-toothed  
perfumed &  
powdered  
in your bauble beads  
hair pressed & tied back  
throbbing with that sick pain  
I know  
& hide so well

...



Ma,  
the beautiful people  
our beautiful brave black people  
who no longer need to jazz  
or sing to themselves in murderous vibrations  
or play the veins of their strong tender arms  
with needles  
to prove that we're still here

-- Al Young, "A Dance for Ma Rainey," 1969.

In the same year when Sterling Brown's poem "Ma Rainey" was published, Ma Rainey's exclusive recording producer, Paramount, one of the biggest race record labels whose business relied heavily on the blues record market, ceased recording out of financial blows from the Great Depression and competition of talking pictures and radio. By then, the dominance of vaudeville blueswomen in the blues record market had already ended for about half a decade and given way to the new frenzy of country blues centering on self-accompanied bluesmen. The once shiny "black pearls" scattered all over: some worked on a diminished scale, gradually fading into obscurity, while some others successfully made their transition to more popular music. Ma Rainey belonged to the former. She returned to her old trails: T.O.B.A circuits and tent shows, till her final retirement from performance back to her home in Columbus in 1935.

It is unclear that when Brown saw her performance that inspired him to write down such a vivid poetic response to record her appeal to the audience. Nevertheless, he must have felt the spiritual power in her singing and performance to picture her as a priestess who got inside her audience and keep them strong. "She had them [the audience] in the palm of her hand...But Ma really knew these people; she was a person of the folk..." (Stewart-Baxter 42). Despite that the Southern vaudeville style of Ma Rainey fell out of popularity together with the decline of urban vaudeville, she becomes immortal

via singing her song that gets hold of her audience in Sterling Brown's poetic imagination.

While Sterling Brown memorized the black community's communal resonance to Ma Rainey as a contemporary witness, Al Young, the poet Laureate of California, cites her as his personal mentor which he'd like to follow. To him, she was the inheritor and carrier of the pain in the blues that was felt by the enslaved, and the receiver and resonator of his message of "the sheer shit of existence" conveyed in his singing and crying. Thirty years after Ma Rainey's death, Al Young revived her in his poetic imagination as a goddess who marked the race memory of singing the misery via the blues. He knows and hides the pain, but still looks forward to show her that black people won't need to assert their existence via singing the blues and jazz.

The above two poems are the two most explicit and direct references to Ma Rainey, her presence, and her performance of vaudeville blues, in African American literature. Both of them relate the imagery of Ma Rainey with the hardships in black experiences, while the former privileges her relieving and healing energy to her audience via blues singing, whereas the latter furthers the message of blues of transcending the pain to seeking for other social venues for self-affirmation. Powerful poems as they both are, they were not the closure of Ma Rainey's imprint on the literary works of black writers. She got hold of a playwright after another 13 years, August Wilson, "the most gifted blues poet on the American stage"<sup>20</sup> whose interest on the blues was actually inaugurated by Bessie Smith. Via a bootleg 78 of Bessie Smith's "Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine" he bought from the St. Vincent de Paul store across

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2015/marchapril/feature/august-wilsons-blues-poetry>

from his residence, Wilson made his first acquaintance with the blues and was stunned by its beauty that stirred deep emotional resonance on him. “I felt it was mine,” he described this response to Bill Moyers in an interview, “this was something I could connect with that I instantly emotionally understood...” (Bryer 63). He listened to the Bessie Smith record twenty-two times in succession in 1965. In the 70s he immersed himself into Ma Rainey’s music, which probably led to the production of his first hit play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. Before diving into the play, a brief biography of Ma Rainey is worthy of mentioning.

On April 26, 1886 in Columbus Georgia, the future “Mother of the blues” was born as Gertrude Pridgett, the second of five children of the Pridgetts. Not much detail was known about her childhood, let alone what led to her to the stage as a young girl of fourteen via a local talent show. Her family influence might be crucial, with a grandmother and parents who used to perform on the stage.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, there was very few professional choices for black people, women in particular, during the turn of the century, and show-business was of one them. According to Christine Dall’s documentary “Wild Women don’t Have the Blues” (1989), finding work dancing or doing comedy routines with a travelling show was a rare opportunity to young black women of the time. Those who could sing the blues as well as dance became the main

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<sup>21</sup> According to *Notable American Women, 1607-1950: a biographical dictionary* (1971) a grandmother of Gertrude, “a stately lady,” have been on the stage after emancipation. Sandra Lieb probably quotes Gertrude’s family details from this dictionary, as she offers exactly same information about the professions of her parents, including the unknown profession of Gertrude’s father and her mother working for the Central Railway of Georgia after her husband’s death. However, John Godrich in his article “Ma Rainey” in *Storyville* (35) (1971) claims that Gertrude’s parents were troupers in travelling minstrel shows. This familial information might not be solid with scarce evidence, but they at least hint at the show-business tradition of Ma Rainey’s family.

attraction. As one of the main attractive singers and dancers, Gertrude married her pursuer William “Pa” Rainey, a minstrel show manager at the age of eighteen and became “Ma” Rainey on stage ever since. The couple formed a dancing and singing team, performing together till “Pa” Rainey’s death in 1919 (Abbott and Seroff: 2017 162), though he was quickly overshadowed by his talented wife during their career as “the Raineys.”<sup>22</sup>

Anyway, show business such as minstrelsy and vaudeville did offer job opportunities for black people, especially musicians and dancers (women in particular) who could communicate and learn from each other, besides making more decent earnings than sharecropping, cotton picking, and domestic labor and other hard labor. Minstrelsy and vaudeville offered a training ground for black entertainers to practice and deliver performance from place to place, carrying around and popularizing hot styles of black music such as the blues. Lieb claims it is part of the many cultural breakthroughs by black culture into the American cultural mainstream (xiii). Ma dived into this trending tide and rose to her stardom. It was not an easy way either, mingled with harsh working conditions, exploitation from managers, producers and T.O.B.A. later beyond prevailing racial and sexist discrimination. But she managed to elevate herself from “the assassinator of the blues” to “the mother of the blues” via her downhome vaudeville style

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<sup>22</sup> *Freeman Indianapolis* praised Ma Rainey as “a great coon shouter” while hooting that Pa Rainey should “retire from the stage” in 1911. To this criticism Ma Rainey wrote a heated letter of protest, claiming that she would stick to her sick husband as wife and partner. Out of incapability of sickness, Pa Rainey did appear less and less on the stage while Ma Rainey rose up to her stardom as “the Assassinator of the Blues”. Till Georgia Tom Dorsey first met the Raineys, he thought Pa Rainey was just the husband and protection of Ma Rainey, since Pa Rainey was not involved with the show but sitting around. See *The Original Blues*, p.169., and the Interview of Georgia Tom Dorsey in 1978. Courtesy of the Blues Archive.

rooted deeply in the folk blues tradition, making her fame and livelihood as financially and sexually independent professional black female entertainer. Singing the blues as early as 1902 but got recorded as late as 1924, Ma Rainey's career as a prominent blues singer actually was mainly on the road performing in minstrel and tent shows instead of recording studios. When the halo on vaudeville blues queens faded out after 1926, Ma Rainey's recording career was also drawn to a close in 1928 though her records would be released into 1930s (Lieb 43). She continued to perform in tent shows "as fine as ever" (46), till her sister's death in 1935 brought her offstage and back to her home in Columbus where she died of heart disease in 1939.

It is a great pity that later audiences like Al Young and August Wilson never had the chance to experience Ma Rainey's "hold" of the audience to her live performances except in the memoirs of contemporary musicians and writers such as Thomas Dorsey and Sterling Brown. The only accessible venue to retrieve Ma Rainey's blues artistry is recordings and affiliated advertisements. Regardless of the poor acoustic recording quality of Paramount records, her songs passed through historical time and space, transforming into literary aspirations these writers enlightened their audiences with and in turn reattuned them to the blues music. While Young pays a direct homage to Ma Rainey in his poem, it is interesting to see August Wilson, who called his discovery of Bessie Smith, which led him to the world of the blues, "the beginning" of his consciousness that he was "the representative and of a culture and a carrier of some very valuable antecedents" (Wilson & Harrison ix), set up his minds to write a play on Ma Rainey as the reflector to the decade of 1920s in his American Century Cycle of ten plays conveying black experience to each decade of the twentieth century.

Inspired by an album of Ma Rainey he bought in 1976, Wilson started writing a play set on an imagined and dramatized recording session of Ma Rainey in a Chicago studio in 1927. He explained his initial intention of writing a play on Ma Rainey in an interview:

“I listened,” he said, “and I began to write. My first idea was to explore the economic exploitation of black musicians. The play took place entirely in the recording studio. I wrestled with that a while and abandoned it. I came back to the play in 1978 and I began to hear the voices of the band members. So I decided to open the door to the band room and see who was inside. The whole time I was writing, I was listening to records in my room. I was listening to the male blues singers -Charlie Patton, Son House – because I was writing the men in the band. And I was trying to write honestly, to acquire the force of the blues” (Freedman 2).

When the play was finally finished in 1981,<sup>23</sup> economic exploitation on black musicians was still a major theme but the play reached much wider and deeper into black history of the decade. It is true that almost three quarters of the two-action play take place while Ma Rainey is *absent*, but her existence is prevailing, physically, and spiritually, threading everything together. As Wilson listened to male blues singers’ records while he’s writing the male bandmembers, it is reasonable to deduce that he must have drawn much inspiration from Ma Rainey’s records so as to render the *real* blues icon to an imaginary literary caricature. In this chapter, I’d like to explore how the five songs of the real Ma Rainey specifically selected by Wilson mold the characterization of his literarily incarnated “Ma Rainey.”

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<sup>23</sup> In 1981 Wilson finished his first draft of the play. The next year it was accepted as a staged reading at the Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center’s National Playwright Conference in 1982 and opened up on Broadway at the Cort Theatre in 1984.

### 3.2 I am Singing Ma Rainey's Song: August Wilson's gonna show you "Ma Rainey's 'Black Bottom'" as Ma Rainey's Own Song

**Moyers:** One of your characters said, "Everyone has to find his own song." How do these people find their song?

**Wilson:** They have it. They just have to realize that, and then they have to learn how to sing it.

-- Bill Moyers, *Conversations with August Wilson*, 2006

**Bynum:** You bound onto your song. All you got to do is stand up and sing it, Herald Loomis. It's right there kicking at your throat. All you got to do is sing it. Then you be free.

-- August Wilson, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, 1988

**Ma Rainey:** ...Now, if that don't set right with you and Sturdyvant...then I can carry my black bottom on back down South to my tour, 'cause I don't like it up here no ways.

**Ma Rainey:** ... Fifteen minutes! You hear me, Irvin? Fifteen minutes. . ., and then I'm gonna take my black bottom on back down to Georgia. Fifteen minutes. Then Madama Rainey is leaving!

-- August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, 1985

The dialogue between Bill Moyers and August Wilson above took place in 1988 in an interview. Moyers quoted the "blues-griot" figure Bynum's enlightening proclamation in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988) to put forward the question that how Wilson's characters find their "song." Meanwhile, Wilson's reply also echoed Bynum's preaching to Herald Loomis that the characters in his plays, as reflections of African American people, have to realize their "song" and learn how to sing it. This theme that "each person has to find his or her own song" resonates throughout Wilson's works. And those who forget their song are bound to the journey in search of it, which can be seen as a metaphorical pilgrimage to self-affirmation essential to "freedom" –the sustenance of African Americans as individuals and community as well as the mooring of their culture. As many of his characters are on the way of searching for their songs,

Wilson does present a real-in-history blues figure who has realized and learned to sing her song, Ma Rainey, in his play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. The play borrows the name from Ma Rainey's iconic hit song "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." However, when "Ma Rainey" in the play makes her forceful threat to carry /take her "black bottom" back down to South/Georgia in her battle with white producers and black competitors, which is crucial to the play's development, the "black bottom" has transcended from the surface reference to the backside of her body; instead, It is transformed into a symbolic signifier designating multiple characteristics of Wilson's fictional "Ma Rainey," her sexuality, physical presence, and her Southern roots reflected in her music in content and style. The symbolic "black bottom," threading the five songs of Ma Rainey sung or mentioned in the play, shapes the imagery of Wilson's "Ma Rainey" into an assertive, independent, and powerful female figure who sings her inner song in her way to achieve contemporary "freedom" within the racist and sexist constraints.

### 3.2.1 Wilson's gonna show you "a sexy mama with her 'big black bottom'"

In Wilson's imaginary run-down studio in Chicago for "Ma Rainey" to make her record in 1927, she is arranged to record four songs: "Prove It on me," "Hear Me Talking to You," "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," and "Moonshine Blues," as well as voluntarily singing a stanza out of "These Dogs of Mine" to herself. While all of the five songs contribute to the confirmation of her imagery, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," the "title track" that "Ma Rainey" insists on recording in the first place, and the only song she sings intactly in the play, deserves primary attention as a prominent designator to the bold expression of black women's self-affirming sexuality prevailing in vaudeville blues of



the 1920s.

“Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” as the title of both the real song and Wilson’s play presents two components of identical importance: “Ma Rainey” and “black bottom.” Since I have given a brief bibliography of Ma Rainey and a short introduction to her direct imprint on African American literature above, I’d like to explore the profound meanings of “black bottom” now. At first sight, “black bottom” could refer to the buttocks of a black person. Its naturally refers to the “ass,” a part of the body which is related to both defecating and sexual functions thus is frequently thought to be nasty and dirty as to be covered up. However, in the 1920s it acquired a new meaning in the popular culture, designating to a particular form of popular dance introduced to the stage by African American dancers which later stirred a national and international craze.

According to Marshall and Jean Stearns, variations of the Black Bottom Dance had long been popularized among semiurban black Southerners through performances in tent shows and vaudeville before 1919, when African American musician and songwriter Perry Bradford published a dance song called “The Original Black Bottom Dance” (Stearns 110). The Stearns quoted the interview of Henry “Rubberlegs” Williams and Jodie Edwards of the *Butterbeans and Susie* team, a comedy duo of the same period, that both of them remembered that the name came from a Negro section in Atlanta. “That dance is as old as the hills,” says Rubberlegs, “done all over the South-why, I remember doing it myself around 1915” (110). These historical accounts proved that Southern black vaudevillians and audience had already familiarize with the “Black Bottom Dance,” before Bradford’s dance song became a nationwide hit when a white dancer Ann Pennington introduced an “expurgated version” by three white composers in *George*

*White's Scandals* in 1926 (Lieb 145). "Black Bottom Dance" had its roots in the Southern black entertainment tradition, to which Ma Rainey testifies in her song "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" (referred as "Black Bottom" in the later text) while she notes a "Alabama friend" named "dancing Sammy" who is "crazy" about "Black Bottom Stomping." Thought it is hard to estimate how much "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" help with promoting the popularity of the dance, it is an undeniable response to this sweeping trend of Black Bottom Dance, which made its way from black show business into the mainstream entertainment industry just like the blues.

Veteran of tent shows and vaudeville shows during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ma Rainey must have had abundant experiences performing the "Black Bottom Dance" as to write the song "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." Anyway, she had performed song-and dance routines for a variety of Black minstrel troupes with her husband since 1904 (Obreshl 33). Trombonist Clyde Bernhardt describes her as the leading dancer on the stage in his firsthand account of witnessing Ma Rainey's performance in 1917:

Then the whole chorus line come stepping out behind her and she dance along, kicking up her heels. The song had dance instructions in the lyrics, and as she call a step, everybody would do it. Soon, the whole cast was out on stage, jugglers, riders, singers, comedians, all dancing wild with Ma Rainey shouting and stomping. She call 'WALK!' and everybody froze. After many calls she finally holler 'SQUAT!' and the whole group squatted down with a roar. including Ma Rainey ... "

She is a competent and commanding leader. This confidence in dancing is also conveyed in her assuring attitude toward the mastery of the Black Bottom Dance which is "pretty good" as described in the lyrics. Consequently, it must give Wilson plentiful confidence to have Ma Rainey, a famed female blues singer performing her self-composed hit song referring to a national "hot dance" that represents the current dance craze as the "title

track” of the play. “Black Bottom Dance” puts significant emphasis on the performer(s)’ backside in dance steps, just as the name of the dance itself manifestates an explicit bluey expression of black sexuality. It is heart-broken pity that no video records or photos are kept on her singing this song on stage and most probably dancing to it. Fortunately, Perry Bradford’s song provides essential information about the professional routine step of “the original ‘Black Bottom Dance’”:

Hop down front and then you Doodle back,  
Mooch to your left and then you Mooch to the right  
Hands on your hips and do the Mess Around,  
Break a Leg until you're near the ground  
Now that's the Old Black Bottom Dance. (Stearns 111)

Bradford’s lyrics describes “the old Black Bottom Dance” as provocative hip movements such as “hopping down front and doodle (slide) back.” Moreover, both “Mooch/Mooche” and “Mess Around” refer to hip-moving dancing steps as well. The Stearns quote the first American white jazz dancer James Barton’s description of the most preeminent and popular African American vaudevillian and comedian Bert Williams’ “terrific Mooch” as “a sort of a sort of shuffle, combining rubberlegs (a type of eccentric dancing featuring a variety of high kicks) with rotating hips” (Stearns 197). “Mess Around” is also a type of dancing requiring a lot of twisting such as putting hands on the hips and moving the hips in wide horizontal circles. Bradford’s introduction of the “Black Bottom Dance” steps designates ample sexual connotations with heavy emphasis on the movements of the pelvis and the buttocks, not to mention the original “slapping of the backside” in the dance steps that Bradford “substitutes with Break-a-leg (a hobbling step)” (111). In a word, “Black Bottom Dance” belongs to one of the “Low Down Dances” which sets to have people (male in particular) aroused and put them “in a trance” as just Ma Rainey

proudly declares in her version of “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.”

In contrast with Bradford’s grooving dance song “The Original Black Bottom,” “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” is not a dance song in the strict sense. Nevertheless, its lyrics are explicitly sexual as the Black Bottom Dance itself, if not more.

[Man speaking:]

Now, you heard the rest. Ah boys, I'm gonna show you the best.  
Ma Rainey's gonna show you her black bottom!

[Ma Rainey singing:]

Way down south in Alabamy  
I got a friend they call dancin' Sammy  
Who's crazy about all the latest dancin'  
Black Bottom Stomping and the new baby prancin'

The other night at a swell affair  
Soon as the boys found out that I was there,  
They said, "Come on, Ma, let's go to the cabaret"  
When I got there you oughta hear them say  
Want to see the dance you call the black bottom  
I wanna learn that dance  
Want to see the dance you call your big black bottom  
That puts you in a trance

All the boys in the neighborhood  
They say your black bottom is really good  
Come on and show me your black bottom  
I wanna learn that dance

I want to see the dance you call the black bottom  
I wanna learn that dance  
Come on and show the dance you call your big black bottom  
It puts you in a trance

Early last morning 'bout the break of day  
Grandpa told my grandmother, I heard him say  
"Get over here and you show the old man your black bottom  
I want to learn that dance."

Now I'm gon' show you all my black bottom  
They Stay to see that dance  
Wait until you see me do my big black bottom  
It'll put you in a trance

[Instrumental break and man speaking:]  
Ah, do it Ma, do it honey. Look out, now, Ma, you's getting' kinda rough there! You bet' be yourself, now, careful now, not too strong, not too strong, Ma!

[Ma Rainey singing:]  
I done showed y'all my black bottom  
You ought to learn that dance.

The song starts with a bold invitation full of sexual undertone in the introduction by an unidentified male voice proclaiming that “Ma Rainey’s gonna show you her black bottom” and affirming it is “the best.” There are no direct descriptions of the sensuous movements of the dance in the song lyrics. Instead, it blasts the tensional sensuality of the dancing atmosphere from the perspective of the male audience who disclose their eagerness to see the dance called “black bottom.” At first “the boys at the swell affair” ask Ma to the cabaret to do the “black bottom” which is praised by “the boys in the neighborhood” as being “really good.” Then demander is shifted to “grandpa” asking “grandma” to “get up and show your good old man your black bottom.” The characterization of “grandpa and grandma” is common in hokum blues songs to make sexual innuendos in a comic and frisky fashion, another way of the blues’ taking “the private”—sexual life of an old couple—to “the public.” As the song adapts this typical caricaturing of “grandpa and grandma,” it may be interpreted as an invitation of a popular “hot dance” but the explicit designation to sexual intercourse can never be missed. The request of “show me your black bottom” recurs throughout the song, demonstrating typical double entendre connotations in blues lyrics repetitiously through tapping on the feigning movements of the haunch of the dance itself, and on the action of showing the male audience a black woman’s bottom which clearly indicates sexual intercourse. The urge from the audience of the spectacle of “black bottom dance” in public recreational

sites like cabarets testifies the popularity of the dance in the neighborhood in the song. Featuring a “hot dance” and sexual openness at the same time, this song complies to the liberating spirit of the roaring twenties to which African Americans contributed greatly in terms of popular culture. By adapting this song into the core of the play and entitle the play with the same name, Wilson also carries on the tradition of vaudeville blues presenting black women as sexually aware and assertive subjects challenging conventional moral values on women’s virtues and aesthetic values of black women’s bodies.

“Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” is an unabashed embracing of sexual love from a black woman’s perspective. Just as Sandra Lieb summarizes, the posture of “showing my black bottom” is “too sexual to be dismissed” (Lieb 145). This overt public embracing of sexuality is confirmed by the female person “Ma” and the songwriter Ma Rainey via the lyrics and delivery of the song. The female persona created by Ma Rainey, as the incarnation of herself, poses an overtly confident attitude toward a hot dance routine that presents the back side of her body along with the sexual intension implied. In fact, her “really good black bottom” praised by the neighborhood males could be a double-entendre reference to her dancing skills as well as her sexual ability attested by the sinuous movements of her hips while she dances. In addition, when the man who breaks into the instrumental break to say “Ah, do it Ma, do it honey” and “Ma, you’s getting’ kinda rough there!” can be another euphemistic testimony to her abilities in dancing and in bed. Throughout the song, she shows a pleased stance toward her “black bottom,” the signifier of both her dancing and sexuality, and poses a proud attitude toward her sexual prowess that can put other people in the cabaret as well as the community “in a trance.”

The advertisement accompanied to the release of “Black Bottom” on the *Chicago Defender* resonated with the sexual disposition of the song as well as Ma’s pride of her sexuality (figure 56). The ad incarnates “Ma Rainey” as the central figure hiking her low-cut dress slightly over her knee with one hand while putting one hand on her hip to push out her bottom. The real Ma Rainey’s dark skin tone is obscured in the ad, probably out of the reason that it is in black-and-white. However, the backside of the Ma Rainey incarnation covered by the dress is dyed with the black color of the background, which is a possible correspondence to the “black” bottom of the dance as well as its sexual connotation. Her overt sexy posture indicating an explicit effort by the copywriters of this ad to imitate “Black Bottom Dance” steps on stage. The boys inviting her to the cabaret to dance and other audience are not presented in the ad. Instead, it portrays two accompanying male musicians pushing their phallic instruments toward her body, one pointing his trombone to her breast while the other pointing his clarinet to her bottom. Though male sexual power is implied in this scene, “Ma Rainey”’s relaxed and joyful smile prioritizes her sexual subjectivity over the male gaze symbolized by the wide-open eyes of the male instrumentalists. Her attitude is straightforward: she is the controlling subject that puts them “in a trance” instead of a conforming sexual object submissive to male sexual aggressiveness. Similar to other vaudeville blues advertisements created by white-owned recording labels I have analyzed in chapter two, this cartoonish ad still reveals typical stereotypes of “perceiving” black people: Ma Rainey’s facial features (her big mouth in particularly) are much exaggerated, while two accompanying musicians are portrayed as identical in costumes and looks. Nevertheless, it does present a visual spectacle of Ma Rainey’s sexual assertiveness supplement to the confidence in the lyrics

of the song as well as the delivery of the singer in the recording.

Via the “Black Bottom” song, the songwriter Ma Rainey does not only create such a female persona who enjoys her sexuality in the sexually explicit lyrics, her delivery and performance of the song recorded in 1928 also testifies her pride of this boldness in presenting woman’s autonomy over their bodies and sexuality. A particular emphasis on the adverb “really (good black bottom)” can be easily noted in the original recording as Ma Rainey stretches the time on the vowel sound of “really”. The vocal treatment of “really” again accentuates how good the female persona’s “black bottom” is, which implies how sexually attractive she is. Moreover, slapping on the body, possibly on her bottom, a sexy gesture included in the original “Black Bottom” steps, can be easily heard when she sings the “grandpa and grandma” stanza in the original recording. With no doubt, the overwhelming sexual allure in the lyrics and in the recording may not escape from the danger of conforming to the black jezebel stereotype, “an exotic temptress whose mesmerizing sensuality is the antithesis of the innocence and piety attributed to the ‘true womanhood’ of affluent white women” (Lewis 18). However, this dangerous imagery of black women is simultaneously tied close to black women’s sexual pleasure despite the tension in between. The sexual pleasure expressed by black women themselves claim their bodies for their own enjoyment which in turn endows autonomy on their sexuality instead of being surrendered as mere sexual objects under racist and sexist gaze. “Sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency” (Vance 1), as Carole S. Vance proclaims. The moment of performing this sexy song empowers the female performer as the primary subject of her sexual being through self-initiated pleasure that challenges



patriarchal objectification of black women's sexuality.

The provocative and pervasive outrage in sexuality from a woman's perspective in the lyrics "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" is a pervading theme of Vaudeville Blues in the 1920s and 30s. However, when black blueswomen like Ma Rainey sang aloud the unembarrassed embracing of sexual love, their boldness and assertiveness of women's sexuality stood at odds against the concurrent bourgeois values of women's respectability. While the American popular music of the 1920s aiming at mainstream white audience avoided depictions of physical side of love, the blues, "the closest Negro equivalent to American popular music" (Levine 275), seldom represses its joy and easiness in references to sexual love. And vaudeville blues songs represented by Ma Rainey's "Black Bottom" are of no exception.

Moreover, since most famed classic blues singers are women, when they preach sexuality in their songs they offer an emphasized alternative discourse of women's sexual experience, challenging traditional gender politics implied in other forms of popular culture. It is also a challenge to the middle-class morality of "womanhood" to which most concurrent Harlem renaissance women writers would cling to as to prove and defend black women's purity and virtues. As Hazel Carby argues in her fundamental article on the sexual politics of women's blues, in order not to fall into the victimization of black female sexuality as "primitive and exotic (Carby 472)", middle class black women writers active in Harlem Renaissance like Nella Larsen show a tendency consciously or unconsciously to "displace female desire to female duty" (472) in the community to uplift the race. This transformation from physical desire to political responsibility definitely responds to the uplift ideology prevailing in the literary and artistic awakening

movements during the time. Meanwhile, it is a compromise or even denial of the female sensuality in terms of their own bodies. In contrast, vaudeville blues songs like “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” provide a powerful outcry of black women’s sensuous sexuality, reclaiming her own body for her own joy. And in this outrageous claim, black women get a chance to reverse the objectification of female sexuality within a racist patriarchal context. While claiming their own bodies and sexuality for their own pleasure, they empower themselves as sexual subjects in these songs. Such bold and public expressions of female sexual desire “give historical voice to possibilities of equality not articulated elsewhere” as argued by Angela Davis (Davis 25).

Beside deviating from the current dominant definitions of women’s virtues, “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” as well as its composer and performer also confront the predominant white cultural aesthetics of feminine beauty of the time. According to Sandra Lieb, white culture after WWI “glorified” slenderness and light complexion shared at the time by many black, middle-class in particular, while on the contrary Ma Rainey is a short, heavy, dark-skinned woman revealed by contemporary photographs and accounts (Lieb 10-11). Telling from one of the most widely disseminated photo of Ma Rainey (figure 57), her “Negroid features,” such as the wiry hair, wide nose, big mouth, and gold-capped teeth, and squat figure, excluded her from the contemporary social standards of feminine attractiveness held by both black and white bourgeois, earning her the epithet of “the ugliest woman alive” (Wall 146). Even the fellows who toured with her consented to the depreciation of her physical beauty. As Clyde Bernhardt recalls, “yes, she was ugly. But I’ll tell you one thing about it: she had such a lovely disposition, you know, and personality. You forget all about it. She commences to lookin’

good to you.” (Lieb 8) And pianist Champion Jack Dupree also says, “she was really an ugly woman, but when she opened her mouth—that was it! You forget everything.”<sup>24</sup> To them, Ma Rainey’s personality and artistry outshone her physical “ugliness.” One of her admirers, Thomas Fulbright, a white showman, must have encountered much disdain on her appearance to utter this:

“Don't ever believe any of the writers who tell you Ma was ugly, for surely they can never have known her. If they had, they would say just what I say: she was beautiful! For all she had to do was smile and sing. Of course, Ethel Waters is an example of what most people call a beautiful Negro woman, but to me, she sometimes makes herself ugly when she sings, not Ma. She made herself beautiful. It was an illusion of course, but one could see her heart and soul when she sang, and how she could catch the mood of a song!”<sup>25</sup>

To him it was Ma’s smile and performance that made her “beautiful” as he still acknowledged that the much slender and lighter singer Ethel Waters was the type to be called “beautiful” in terms of appearance. However, to Alberta Hunter, Ma’s peer who was still active in the Blues Revival in the 1960s, Ma’s “countryfied ugliness” was a part of her performance on stage.

"They said she was the ugliest woman in show business," Alberta Hunter once said. "But Ma Rainey didn't care, because she pulled in the crowds. Some of us used to laugh at her, because she was so countryfied. But I think her looks were part of her act – just look at some of those kids out there today, those young med with the wild hair and makeup. Are they pretty? No, but people notice them, and they're making money."<sup>26</sup>

Whether Ma Rainey agreed with the aesthetical judgement on her “Negroid” physique or not, she was definitely performing her body as well as her sexuality while singing “Black Bottom.” Unapologetic of her heavy shaped body, she actually adds

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<sup>24</sup> The quote is acquired from the Ma Rainey Collection of the Blues Archive of the University of Mississippi.

<sup>25</sup> See 78 Quartly Ma Rainey and her Jazz band. P45.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.rhino.com/article/ma-rainey>

addition to her fleshy backside while she alternatively addresses “black bottom” as “big black bottom.” Paramount’s cartoon incarnation did not miss her body shape as it depicts a plump “Ma Rainey” with big breasts, wide hips, fleshy bottom as well as big arms and legs which she feels unashamed at all to expose in a slip dress and a sexy pushing-butt posture. Ma Rainey proclaims confidence in her sexuality as a black woman with dark skin and plump hip in “Black Bottom” song. This pride in her “big black bottom” also testifies the alternative standard of black feminine beauty honored by black folk culture that “has always admires ‘a heavy-hipped mama’ with ‘great big legs’ (Lieb 10). Folk blues also honors the sexual appeal of darker-skinned and big-legged women, such as Mississippi John Hurt’s country blues song “Big Leg Blues” which claims:

Raise up, baby, get your big leg offa mine  
Raise up, baby, get your big leg offa mine  
They're so heavy, make a good man change his mind.  
...  
Some crave high yellow, I like black and brown  
Some crave high yellow, I like black and brown  
Black won't quit you, brown won't lay you down.

Drawing heavily from the folk blues tradition, Ma, together with her song, conveys a message deviating from the mainstream sexist aesthetics of beauty of black women: a fat “mama” with big black bottom and legs is sexually desirable and desired. It cannot be denied that such a sensual image of a sexually attractive black woman is formed in the gaze of patriarchal racism and sexism. One can even argue that it is the construction and performance of both the “exotic” and “erotic” via the media of a black female body which continues to “bear the gross insult” and “burden of spectacular (representational) exploitation” (Brooks 7) of racism and sexism. However, all blame cannot conceal the sexual prowess and confidence performed by the female black body who rolls her black bottom around with a proud and hearty laugh, as it does capture well Ma Rainey’s vigor

in her disposition, her personality and her (sexual) confidence that makes her a popular star among black people.

Ma proves how big leg mama can be sexually attractive through her performance of the “Black Bottom” song. As the writer and singer of “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” Ma Rainey imposes a self-initiated agency over her body and her sexuality symbolized by her “black bottom.” August Wilson captures this symbolization and celebration of the sexually appealing imagery of a heavy-hipped black or brown skinned women from Ma Rainey’s song “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” and in turn endows it to his fictional “Ma Rainey” in his play. He does not add any further instructions for “Ma Rainey” to sing the song in the recording studio and he does not need to. By incarnating a “short, heavy” (Wilson 48) “Ma Rainey” and let her sing “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” in the imaginary recording studio in front of the theatre audience, he has transcended time and history of nearly sixty years to bring the versatile singer and dancer “Mother of the Blues” back to the present, together with her body and her sexuality all wrapped up in the performance of the song.

Carving time and space to transcribe the lyrics of the whole song in the script, Wilson sets up “Black Bottom” to be performed by the actress of “Ma Rainey” as the only song “Ma Rainey” records live in the studio. He does make adaptations based on his specific characterization, as he keeps the first intro part spoken by a male voice but deletes his second insertion saying “Ah, do it Ma, do it honey.” He might listen to an uncomplete version of the original “Black Bottom” song, but I assume the adaptation is more possibly made intentionally by Wilson, since he arranges the nephew of “Ma Rainey” to do to intro, which makes it inappropriate for such a character of “Ma”’s kin to

utter that overwhelming double entendre lines to flirt with her. Even though this adaptation cuts down the sexual connotations of the song to a certain degree, it is still a bold statement of the sexuality of “heavy-hipped” dark women when actresses such as Theresa Merritt, Jevetta Steele, and Viola Davis in the 2010 filming of the play swing or even slap the backside of their bodies while casting “Ma Rainey.” In fact, Wilson also testifies the acknowledgement of the sexual prowess of big-legged black women among the black folk in the story told by Toledo, in which one black fellow accuses another of going to the church for the sake of Widow Jenkins with “big, fine, pretty legs” (29). In contrast, “Ma Rainey”’s “big legs” or “big black bottom” are not discussed directly in the play. Nevertheless, at the moment and the space of performing the “Black Bottom” song, Ma Rainey demonstrates her autonomy over her body and sexuality and her sexual prowess via the publicization of her “big black bottom,” as “wild” as to pose an unashamed but proud attitude toward her testimony against the mainstream politics and aesthetics of respectable “womanhood.”

Wilson does not only present the “wildness” of “Ma Rainey” in publicizing a black women’s private part in an arousing dance to assert her sexual subjectivity over men, but also testify this heavy-hipped mama’s unconventional bisexuality through the implication of recording “Prove it on me Blues” and the incarnation of her fleshy homosexual partner of “Ma Rainey”, Dussie Mae. Just as the female protagonist proudly poses her “black bottom” that puts “boys” and “grandpa” in a trance, “Prove it on me Blues” declares a woman’s unashamed sexual interest on and attraction to the same sex :

Went out last night, had a great big fight  
Everything seemed to go on wrong  
I looked up, to my surprise  
The gal I was with was gone.

Where she went, I don't know  
I mean to follow everywhere she goes;  
Folks say I'm crooked. I didn't know where she took it  
I want the whole world to know.

They say I do it, ain't nobody caught me  
Sure got to prove it on me;  
Went out last night with a crowd of my friends,  
They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men.

It's true I wear a collar and a tie,  
Makes the wind blow all the while  
Don't you say I do it, ain't nobody caught me  
You sure got to prove it on me.  
Say I do it, ain't nobody caught me  
Sure got to prove it on me.

I went out last night with a crowd of my friends,  
It must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men.  
Wear my clothes just like a fan  
Talk to the gals just like any old man  
Cause they say I do it, ain't nobody caught me  
Sure got to prove it on me.

Lieb claims that “there is strong evidence to indicated that Ma Rainey, like Bessie Smith was bisexual” (17). She was even reportedly arrested thrown into jail in 1925 by the Chicago police who caught her running a “wild” party with her chorines:

She and a group of young women had been drinking, and they made so much noise that a neighbor summoned the police. The impromptu party was getting intimate, and as bad luck would have it, the law showed up just as everyone began to let their hair down. Pandemonium broke loose as girls madly scrambled for their clothes and ran out the back door, leavin Ma, clutching someone else's dress, to exit last. Ma did not get away, however, for she had a nasty fall down a staircase and practically into the arms of the law. Accused of running an indecent party, she was thrown in jail, where she stayed until Bessie bailed her out the following morning. (Albertson 116)

“Prove it on me” could be her dramatic reflection of this embarrassing tangle released three years after the incident, as the scene of her getting into a big fight and finding her gal gone hilariously corresponds to her unfortunate fall at the staircase that hindered her

escape like other girls. Publicizing the real or made-up experience of “going out with a crowd of women” as she “doesn’t like no men” brings her bisexuality from a private space to a public arena. Despite of being embarrassing caught in the state of undress by the police in the real life, she poses unapologetic attitude toward the accuse of being “crooked” with women in this song via the unapologetic line of “Say I do it, ain’t nobody caught me” as well as the bold exclamation of her bisexuality that she “wants the whole world to know.” Moreover, both the cartoonish advertisements of “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” (figure 56) and “Prove it on me Blues” (figure 55) honestly mirror her heavy-hipped figure while charactering her sexuality on the basis of the lyrics. Writing and singer these two songs, Ma proves how big leg mama can be sexually attractive to both men and women from a woman-centered perspective, imposing a self-initiated agency over her body and her sexuality (bisexuality). August Wilson captures this celebration of the sexually appealing imagery of a heavy-hipped black or brown skinned women to both sexes in these two songs and in turn endows it to his fictional “Ma Rainey” in his play.

Compared with “title track” that takes up the time to be sung fully in the play, “Prove it on me Blues” is only mentioned in the list of songs arranged by the white producers to be recorded by “Ma Rainey.” Instead of having her singing the song live in the studio, Wilson incarnates a female character Dussie Mae, referred as “Ma Rainey’s gal” by the band leader Culter, as a fleshy signifier of “Ma Rainey” ’s homosexuality. Wilson confirms her “sensual energy” as the “greatest asset which seems to flow from her.” In appreciation of Dussie Mae’s sensuality, Ma talks to her “like any old man,” as the lyrics of “Prove it” indicates, praising her “nice looking dress” and offering her “some more things” (60). However, as the other black female figure of the only two besides “Ma



Rainey” in the play, Wilson characterizes Dussie Mae as catering more keenly to the “Black Jazebel” of black women who surrenders to sexual desire and materialism. Being the dependent of “Ma” as her provider, she flirts with Levee, the trumpet player in “Ma”’s band, who offers her “his red rooster” (82) as well as “presents and things” (81). Just like the female persona who finds her gal gone and claims to follow wherever her gone goes in “Prove it,” “Ma Rainey” is aware of unfaithful partnership as she senses her gal’s sensual attraction to Levee just like that to herself. She reacts like the female persona in “Rough and Tumble Blues” (written by Ma Rainey as well) who kills her competitors as they mess with her “good-looking man”: on the one hand, she warns Levee not to get his eyes “in the wrong place” (73) while asking Dussie Mae to “quit flaunting herself around” (78) on the other. Ironically, “Ma Rainey” herself uninhibitedly flaunts around with her “Black Bottom,” an indelible signifier of her body and her sexuality, as well as an attractive female partner who designates to her homosexual relationship in the public space. Making “Ma Rainey” perform sensuality via recording of “Black Bottom” and unconventional bisexuality interweaving Ma’s queer song “Prove it” with a love triangle plotting of characters, Wilson resurrects the particularity and complicacy of women’s sexual experiences in the tradition of Vaudeville blues sung by “black pearls” like Ma Rainey.

Ma Rainey herself and her music are a part of the racial memory and particularity of the experience of vaudeville blueswomen that resonate with the pulse of the 1920s. This decade witnessed the breakthrough of black professional entertainers into the phonograph industry, which gave them opportunities to become part of the national craze for sensual black music genres like the blues and jazz while degenerating and exploiting

them at the same time. By revitalizing “Ma Rainey” singing her “Black Bottom” song and performing her bisexuality via a factual homosexual intimacy indicated by “Prove it” in the play, Wilson also revives the “wild” women who sing the blues as the carrier of their subjectivity over their bodies and sexuality they could express or realize elsewhere as an indelible signifier of black experiences in the 1920s.

### 3.2.2 “She is showbusiness” and good business

Besides serving as a crucial signifier to exclaiming “Ma Rainey”’s (bisexual) in the public sphere, “black bottom,” as a body part closely related to sexual prowess and covered by clothing, can also designate to her overall physical presence in Wilson’s play furnished by “Ma Rainey”’s exquisite gowning in “a royal fashion” (48), the fashion most vaudeville blueswomen attired in of the 1920s as discussed in the last chapter. “Their physical presence was a crucial aspect of their power; the visual display of spangled dresses, of furs, of gold teeth, of diamonds, of all the sumptuous and desirable aspects of their body reclaimed female sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire,” claims by Hazel Carby (479). This “female desire” embraces their desires of feminine beauty (based on their aesthetics), of financial independence, and of social dignity. Wilson mines such female desires from the physical presence of vaudeville blueswomen including Ma Rainey and gives it back to his “Ma Rainey.” As “Ma Rainey” finally “enter” the play at the middle of Act One, Wilson lays out her dressing attire in detail:

MA RAINEY is a short, heavy woman. She is dressed in a full-length fur coat with matching hat, an emerald-green dress, and several strands of pearls of varying lengths. Her hair is secured by a head band that matches her dress. Her manner is simple and direct, and she carries herself in a royal fashion (Wilson 48).

Wilson uses “royal fashion” to describe her disposition set off by her fine attire with a “full-length” fur coat, a dress, and a pearl necklace. This costuming of “Ma Rainey” might be inspired by Ma’s representative photo in figure 57 which is also the cover photo of Sandra Lieb’s bibliography, as it presents her with a headband, a beaded satin dress and a pearl necklace. The photo of Ma Rainey and her Georgia Jazz Band in figure 40 may offer a good reference to the “emerald-green dress” as described in the play. These photos are the solid proof of the glamorous Ma Rainey in her stage costume who is well-known for her spectacular wardrobe and her fondness of jewelry within her affordability.

However, Wilson’s “Ma Rainey” is offstage in the strict sense. She is in a recording studio instead, with no audience but her family members, band members and white producers, which may complicate her “dressing code” due to the lack of luxurious onstage costuming requirements. As regards the real Ma Rainey’s offstage dressing style, Hettie Jones claims a noticeable difference between Ma Rainey’s theatrical costume and “street dressing” in her book *Big Star Fallin’ Mama*:

For Ma the diamonds and sequined dresses were theatrical magic; she did not wear them in the street. She was a hard-working woman; she worked and lived a lot of the time outdoors. And she sang to other people whose lives were spent working outdoors, by day, sometimes in the same fields. She performed in barns or school houses or dance halls as well as in theaters. Dressing rooms, if there were any, were not exactly luxurious. Hers was not the comfortable life of a movie star, she was not a glamour girl, a beauty queen devoted to perpetual youth. (34)

Jones seems to imply Ma Rainey’s “royal fashion” costume only applied to her performances in formal locations like *theatres* other than folk entertainment places such as “barns or school houses or dance halls” and everyday dressing occasions. It is true that Ma Rainey might not afford the sumptuous life of a Hollywood movie star even with her earnings, as a well-famed entertainer and a recording star, much higher than average

working-class black people. Nevertheless, not being a “beauty queen” of light complexion and slim figure judged by dominant aesthetic values did not necessarily her desire to be a “glamour girl” telling from photos of Ma Rainey offstage.

As her childhood and maiden years remain pretty much a mystery, a rare photo (Figure 59) probably taken of Gertrude in her teens and presented by John Tefteller on the 2019 Blues Calendar sheds light into her fashion taste and personality of the future “Mother of the blues.” This photo presents young Gertrude standing behind a blooming tree with a big bright smile on her face, a trademark of most of her later pictures as “Ma Rainey”. She might have her bang ironed, since they clung to her forehead tightly while most of her hair stayed wiry and kinky. And she wore a collared shirt with a cardigan on the top, matching with a skirt, leggings, and boots. Though this photo in black-and-white cannot tell how well she matched the colors, it clearly foreshadows her passion in stylish dressing from an early age.

This fashion of clothes-matching seems to persist into her grownup life, since another photo publicized by University of West Georgia center for public history taken of Ma Rainey and Georgia Tom Dorsey (figure 60), the musical director on some of her best recordings, reveals Ma’s sustained taste in dressing. In this photo she wore a collared shirt with a skirt, matching with a knit cardigan of similar texture. Her hair looked somewhat fuzzy, probably out of wearing the cool fedora hat she was holding in her left hand. Though the matching style in this photo is analogous to that of young Gertrude, an obvious difference can be easily observed: Ma Rainey was wearing a pearl necklace and several rings on both hands. Like that of figure 59, the yellow color and blurred quality of figure 60 could not reveal her taste of matching colors of clothing and accessories, it is

still a strong testimony of Ma Rainey's passion in fancy dressing and fine accessories.

As rare proof of Gertrude's everyday dressing favor (maybe not strictly "everyday", since she might dress up for meeting Dorsey or the photo-taking), Figure 60 that presents Ma Rainey with jeweled rings and necklace seems to undercut Hettie Jones's claim of Ma's "non-glamour" offstage dressing style. "Gert was flashy. She liked to wear sparkling dresses and \$10 and \$20 gold pieces on her ears and neck,"<sup>27</sup> says her cousin Ella Mae Sanders who used to travel across the South, without mentioning a differentiation between onstage and offstage like Jones does. If Figure 59 and 60 do present a somehow "low-key" dressed Ma Rainey in her daily life, she impressed most people as the flashy "Mother of the Blues" in feathery or fur coat early in her career, plus sequined or beaded dresses or gowns in flamboyant colors like maroon and tortoise blue. Figure 61 presents a photo of Ma Rainey in youth in a light-color feathery coat, with her hair stylishly done (or a wig) as they topped up on her head instead of standing out wildly. Already titled as "Ma Rainey" despite the of being mistakenly rendered as "moraine," she looked slimmer, much younger, and less mature than most of her later photos, with a touch of the temperament of her future fame but still years to go. While Figure 61 is too blurry to show whether she had any accessories on or not, Figure 62 featuring shows Ma as a confident and mature star greeting a fan in a lavish dark-colored gown with her famous gold-coin necklace and earrings that earned her the epithet of as "the gold-neck woman of the blues (figure 63)." She adorned this necklace of shimmer and monetary value so much to wear it both on and off stage till it was stolen on a train in

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<sup>27</sup> See "'Ma' Rainey's Cousin Recalls Life on the Road with Blues Singer". Courtesy Blues Archive.

one of her late twenties' tours, which disgusted her to replace with an imitation pearl necklace (Godrich). In all, she was never an unstylish lady whether onstage or offstage, despite that contemporary critic Elysa Gardner teased her "gaudy taste" in clothing and jewelry.<sup>28</sup>

Ma Rainey's flashy attire does not only attest to her own aesthetics of women's glamour but also contributes significantly to her appeal to her audience. Clyde Bernhardt's firsthand account of Ma Rainey's show in 1917 describes the spectacle:

Ma Rainey closed the show. When she was ready to go on, the great lady start singing in the wings and as the curtains opened, strutted out flashing those gold-plated teeth and her expensive gold necklace. She wore a long, gold silk gown that swept along the floor, gold slippers, and carried a sparkling rhinestone walking cane. Her hat was high and wide with large feathers stuck in it, had gold earrings dangling and diamond rings on all her fingers. When she got to center stage under those amber spotlights, the audience just went wild. She was all of what show business was suppose to be. She was show business. (26)

Thomas Dorsey remembers vividly the occasion of her first performance in Chicago in 1924 years after, still memorizing the frenzy of her outfit:

...Then she would open the door and step out into the spotlight with her glittering gown that weighed twenty pounds and wearing a necklace of five, ten and twenty dollar gold-piece. The house went wild. It was as if the show had started all over again. Ma had the audience in the palm of her hand. Her diamonds flashed like sparks of fire falling from her fingers. The gold-piece necklace lay like a golden armor covering her chest. They called her the lady with the golden n throat... (quoted in Lieb 28-30)

Even the *Chicago Defender* that carried numerous advertisements of vaudeville blueswomen's records but seldom commented on their performance praised her gowns as "wonderful creations of the dressmaker's art (quoted in Lieb 28)". The fancy dressing and jewelry undoubtedly play an indispensable role for her to put the audience "in a

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<sup>28</sup> Elysa Gardner describes Ma Rainey as a "matronly looking woman with bad teeth and gaudy taste" in her article "Ma Rainey" on VIBE probably distributed in 1996. (Courtesy of the blues archive of University of Mississippi)

trance” as she claims in the “Black Bottom” song. The Paramount advertisement of this song also reveal her magic in onstage attire by featuring her heavy-hipped incarnation in a silky slip dress and high heels with her trademark gold-coin necklace and two jeweled bangles on her wrists (figure 56). In her performance with flamboyant costuming, the image of the heavysset black women which is usually portrayed as mammy figure, is “subverted and transformed into a symbol of sexuality and style” (Elam 97). Likewise, the head photo featuring her with her landmark necklace made of shining gold coins appear in most of Paramount’s advertisements of Ma Rainey’s record such as those of “Prove it on Me” and “Moonshine Blues.” Lieb defines blues queens like Ma Rainey as “self-conscious stars” differentiated from “drifters and neighbors who sang for local parties on Saturday night [precedents of male country blues singers who replaced vaudeville blueswomen in the recording industry],” as “they wore makeup, elaborate gowns, and jewelry, and they appeared in traveling revues complete with a stage and footlights (Lieb 60)”. Such consciousness of “making themselves beautiful,” as Fulbright’s description of Ma Rainey’s performance onstage, adds onto their artistry as well as their imagery as affluent and powerful icons of black women coming from the lower class of the black community, influencing Wilson’s characterization of “Ma Rainey” as well as other black characters accordingly.

Wilson demonstrates clearly his awareness of the onstage appeal, financial affordability and social dignity of exquisite costuming of black characters in the play. After giving an attentive portrayal of the capability and personality of the first three bandmember entering the studio, he specifically depicts their dressing: “All the men are dressed in a style of clothing befitting the members of a successful band of the era” (20).

Though Wilson does not offer details of the clothing, the photo of the real Ma Rainey's Jazz's Hounds taken in 1922 could be a best example as the somber face of the pianist somehow resembles that of Toledo. In this photo, the male band members are all dressed in neat suits and shirts with bow tie paired with shone faux leather shoes, demonstrating the formal and stylish dressing fashion "befitting the members of a successful band of the era" testified by the clothing of accompanying musicians presented in the advertisements of vaudeville blues records such as that of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." Their costuming declares a strong urge to "look good" while accompanying starry vaudeville blueswomen like Ma Rainey. The band of "Ma Rainey" in Wilson's play would definitely follow this "dressing code" as the proof to their status of a commercially "successful band" working for the "Mother of the Blues." In fact, all the cast of the band members in theatrical performances of the play as well as the 2010 filming adaptation all conform to such dressing style. Ma Rainey's fine adornment onstage that also extends to the accompanied co-workers reveals her sharp "consciousness" of what "flashy presence" means to successful showbusiness. She seemed to have a better perception of business management and financial independence than her peers obscured by the decline of the blues boom in the 1930s which made her "a good business woman" (Lieb 47) managing to operate two theatres she acquired in Rome, Georgia after her retirement. "She is show business," as Clyde Bernhardt honors her, and also good business.

In a similar sense, when "Ma Rainey" rushes into the studio in her fur coat, emerald-green dress and stylish pearl necklaces of varying lengths, her gowning and temperament of "royal fashion" (48) indicate her physical glamour and financial affordability surpassing that of the bandmembers that empower her with "a flurry



commotion” (47) to the Act and the audience. Vaudeville blueswomen who raised to stardom in the recording industry did achieve comparative financial success than most working-class black people and also regular black entertainers. As the sales of Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues” exceeded half million copies, her individual appearance fee stood at \$1000 in May 1921 (Foreman 61). Columbia offered Bessie Smith a contract at \$ 125 per usable side in 1923 which was raised to \$200 in December of the same year out of the smash popularity of her recordings (Albertson 17, 59). Paramount possibly paid Ma Rainey at about the same amount or somewhat less, around \$100 per side suggested by J. Mayo Williams<sup>29</sup>, the black talent scout and recording director hired by Paramount, as she was surpassed by Bessie in terms of recoding sales. Being paid per side instead of receiving royalty was an overt economical exploitation on black entertainers by the recording companies, but the fee was still impressive in comparison with the regular hourly salary around \$1 earned by black lower-class.

By the year of 1927, in which Wilson sets the play, recording careers of vaudeville blueswomen was already in a decline, threatened by the rising success of male country blues singers who were far less paid than the blues queen (Lieb 38). But business was still good enough for Ma who was constantly on the road performing in rural southern tent show to buy “a thirteen-thousand-dollar Mack bus emblazoned with her name” (Lieb 38). Wilson substitutes touring bus with a fancy car that fits more appropriately for “Ma”’s personal use for record making in Chicago. No matter it is a car or a bus she owns, it is the solid proof of her good financial condition just like her expensive fur coat and jewelry. “Ma Rainey” shows a keen percipience toward the negotiation of social

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<sup>29</sup> See *Living Blues*. Issue #273, Vol. 42, #4, Pp. 35.

respectability underlay the financial affordability indicated exquisiteness of attire, which was usually not thought of accessible to the impoverished working-class black people. In fact, her flashy clothing and emphasis on her ownership of the car may be a crucial reason that the white policeman, charging her of “assault and battery” and suspecting the owner of the car, decides to bring her to the recording studio to see” if she’s as important as says she is... (51-52)”. She dresses like a “Madame” and insists on being called “Madame Rainey” by Irvin in front of the police officer like the real Ma Rainey “preferred to be addressed in person” (Oliver 68), an honorable “height” she was the first ever to be elevated to as advertised by Paramount for sales (figure 64). Such clutch to the social respectability the status of “Madame” reveals her understanding of the power coming with the social respectability implied by financial affluence rarely achieved by black people of grassroots like her, which may play a role in her struggle against racist defiance represented by the police officer unjustified charges of disturbance caused by the car accident on her solely.

“Ma Rainey” ’s insistence of dressing respectably also extends to her protégés, her homosexual partner Dussie Mae and her nephew Sylvester. Dussie Mae is described as dressed in “a fur jacket and a tight-fitting canary-yellow dress,” the fit of which is appraised by Ma Rainey as she intimately tugs it around Dussie Mae’s waist:

That dress looks nice. I’m gonna take you tomorrow and get you some more things before I take you down to Memphis. They got clothes up here you can’t get in Memphis. I want you to look nice for me. If you gonna travel with the show you got to look nice. (60)

“Got to look nice to travel with the show” is the fictional Ma Rainey’s testimony of her awareness of the appeal of lavish gowning in performances. Not only herself, she also offers her lesbian partner with financial stability via supplying her “whatever you need”

(60) like fancy clothing and shoes. She takes the exquisite clothing of her lover as a declaration of her own affordability by claiming that “I want you to look nice for me.” Meanwhile, she also declares to buy her nephew Sylvester “more clothes,” hinting that the “new suit and coat” in which he is “obviously uncomfortable” is supplied by his aunt as well. She also commands him to “look nice.”

MA RAINEY: ...Sylvester, tuck your clothes in. Straighten them up and look nice. Look like a gentleman.

DUSSIE MAE: Look at Sylvester with that hat on,

MA RAINEY: Sylvester, take your hat off inside. Act like your mama taught you something. I know she taught you better than that. (61)

Demanding him to straight up his clothes and take off his hat inside, she also asks her

Arkansas nephew who feels uneasy in a Chicago studio to “look nice,” not for her but for himself to behave respectably “like a gentleman.” Although she shows an identical generosity of material satisfaction to both her lover and her nephew, her discipline of her nephew reveals a maternal concern that does not apply to Dussie Mae. She finds him an opportunity to do the intro of the recording, insures him to get paid like other band members, and asks him to send part of his payment to his mother down south, as it makes the mother feel good to see her son “doing right in the world” which clearly indicates his ability of making a livelihood. Via the maternal guidance and protect, she means to help him overcome his stuttering as well as teaching the importance of financial independence and familial responsibility. Although the real Ma Rainey was admired for her maternal encouragement and generosity to the musicians<sup>30</sup>, Wilson’ “Ma Rainey” seems endows the property of her maternity to her care for and guidance to Sylvester while treating her lover more like a plaything.

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<sup>30</sup> See Lieb pp.30. and “Comments on Ma Rainey.” (Courtesy Blues archive)

As a bandmember who clearly does not perceive Ma's maternal concern, Levee is probably the character who consents on "Ma Rainey"'s awareness of the performativity of extravagant attire that symbolizes sensual appeal and societal power. His new "decent" shoes, on which he spends a week's pay together with four dollars borrowed from Cutler, is the signifier of his ambition and manhood. Being rejected by Dussie Mae at the club the night before the recording session, he buys a pair of "nice shoes" to impress her as an indicator of his imaginary promising future as a recording artist who owns his own band and earns "green money." Sharecropper With the decent new shoes, he is ready to "play some good music" (24) that would ostensibly elevate him to the powerful status of "Ma Rainey." While Cutler regards his lavish spending on the Florsheims shoes as foolish, Levee asserts his understanding of the affiliation between social status and affordability:

LEVEE: Nigger got them clodhoppers! Old brogans! He ain't nothing but a sharecropper. (40)  
He even shares "Ma"'s taste of matching clothing in a sense as he considers it inappropriate to "put on a suit and tie them with farming boots" (40). The shoes may prove their value in his convincing Dussie Mae of his "promised" future to become a successful recording star like Ma Rainey as she surrenders to his pursuit in the band room to exchange a passionate kiss with him. However, Levee fails to get hold of financial independence before claiming affordability unlike "Ma Rainey." As he has to borrow money from Cutler to afford the new shoes, his hope for social respectability and financial affordability is fake and artificial as he lays it on the white producers' exploitative hands. Envious of "Ma Rainey" extravagant presence that prioritizes her onstage and in sexual competition, Levee fails to seize what empowers Ma as a blues queen to handle the white men: the connection to her audience in her music.

### 3.2.3 “Hear me singing Ma Rainey’s song in the old way”

In addition to its designation to the sexuality and presence of “Ma Rainey,” “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” in Wilson’s play also symbolize her musical particularity—the deep root of her blues in the rural culture of southern black people. In Sterling Brown’s poem “Ma Rainey,” black people from “de little river settlements/ from blackbottom corncrows and lumber camp” travels via all means like mules or trains to hear Ma Rainey. Here “black bottom” refers to a lowland alluvial area near a river that is naturally fertile. In the South such “little river settlements” are typically habituated by rural black people. Meanwhile, in the semi-urban or urban settings, it also refers to the African American communities and neighborhoods of many Southern cities and towns. In this sense, “black bottom” could be seen as a best signifier designating to the blues of Ma Rainey that mingles her particular heavier rural elements with urban elements common in the vaudeville blues genre. However, compared with her sister singers of the semi-urban Vaudeville Blues in the 1920s, Ma Rainey’s music shows a far stronger link to the southern black folk tradition in terms of content and manner of performance, raising her to the state of “Songbird of the South,” and maintaining her popularity among her southern audience. Wilson juxtaposes “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” “Those Dogs of Mine,” and “Moonshine Blues” to the set solid foundation of her Southern style of vaudeville blues confronted with questioning and competition in the play.

As regards to the content, “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” gives subtle hints at the southern cultural root of Ma Rainey’s songs, indicated by “the Alabamy friend” of the protagonist “Dancing Sammy” as “Black Bottom” dance that became a national craze

stemmed from the South. And the reference to the protagonist's "Alabamy friend " called "Dancing Sammy," who masters this "new baby prancing" and probably teaches her to how to do her "Black Bottom" well, also attests the popularity of this dance in Southern show business. Notwithstanding its assertiveness of black women's sexuality, it is one of her simple downhome songs about the everyday life of Southern black people. Using "Black Bottom" song as the crucial "track title" that prioritizes other songs in the recording session, Wilson successfully connects "Ma Rainey" in a Chicago studio with her southern audience. With the ignition of the "track title," Wilson also thrusts another song, "Those Dogs of Mine," for his fictional "Ma Rainey" to sing to herself to reinforce her bond to the black folk.

As "one of the last of the great Negro minstrel artists, and definitely one of the first to feature blues as such (around 1902) on the stage", Ma Rainey brought "the sounds of the South, the blues of the field workers (or their derivatives), the songs of the wandering musicians and the ballads of the tent and minstrel shows" to the recording industry (Stewart-Baxter 35). "Those Dogs of Mine," advertised as "Ma Rainey's famous corn field blues" and released in 1924, is one of her self-written blues songs of the field workers and wandering musicians. Judging from the lyrics of "These Dogs of Mine," it sounds like the lament of the female protagonist on her sore feet, which she calls "these dogs (hounds) of mine," an exemplary usage of exquisite metaphors she draws from the black oral tradition, and the hurtful corns that burn:

Look-a here people, listen to me,  
Believe me I'm telling the truth.  
If your corns hurt you just like mine,  
You'd say the same words too.

Out for a walk, I stopped to talk,

Oh how my corns dis burn,  
I had to keep on the shaded side of the street,  
To keep out light of the sun.

Oh Lawdy these dogs of mine,  
They goin' to worry me all the time.  
The reason why I don't know,  
Sometimes I soak 'em in sapolio\*.

Lord I've begged to be excused,  
I can't wear me no sharp-toed shoes.  
Oh Lordy, how the sun do shine,  
Down on all of these hounds of mine.

In the surface, the song seems to talk about the hardships in a wanderer's life via the emphasis of the bad feet with corns. However, the cartoon advertisement makes specific use of the pun of "corn" to market it as "Ma Rainey's famous corn field blues:" it depicts three stems of corns withering under the sun from the toes of a foot in a shoe. In this way, the plant of corn is related to the "corns," the small, painful areas of hard skin which can form on one's foot, especially near the toes, out of repetitious rubbing against shoes due to long walk or hard labor (figure 64). The double meanings of "corn" designate to two of the few professions of southern black people in the 1920s: sharecropper and touring entertainers. While none of the two escaped economical and racial exploitations, the entertainers probably earned a little higher income than the mostly impoverished sharecroppers. Born in the downhome Georgia and performed in the minstrel troupe, Ma Rainey knew both the hard life of field works who had to labor in the fields under the sun all day long, and the touring entertainers who were only allowed to travel in segregated trains and performed in side shows even though she was already a recording star by this time. At a certain degree, this advertising strategy of dramatizing the pun of "corn" connects Ma Rainey's song of "sore-feet wanderers" to sharecroppers, helping it to

resonate with a wider range of her people who she wishes to reach, as she calls “Look-a here people, listen to me” to share her same words of truth of black experiences. In a word, “Those dogs of mine” is one of her songs that can “get hold of” her southern audience just as Sterling Brown’s description of her appeal to in his poem.

Without mentioning “Those Gods of Mine” directly in the play, Wilson sets up a specific scene for “Ma Rainey” to sing this song naturally. After the annoying and exhausting disturbances with the cab driver in the street and later with the police officer at the entrance of the studio, “Ma Rainey” sits down and takes off her shoe, rubbing her feet and singing to herself a stanza out of this song:

Oh, Lord, these dogs of mine  
They sure do worry me all the time  
The reason why I don’t know  
Lord, I beg to be excused,  
I can’t wear me no sharp-toed shoes.  
I went for a walk  
I stopped to talk  
Oh, how my corns did bark(burn). (60)

Her sore feet that need to be rubbed under this particular circumstance may indicate her frustration caused by the Northern racism she encounters represented by the cab driver who refuses nastily to haul colored folks, and the police officer who only charges colored people in a conflict. However, singing a song about “sore feet and corns” black wanderers and sharecroppers at the moment, she transcends from the lamenting on the hardships in the individual experience to forge a communal expression of shared black folk experiences. “Ma know something about bad feet” (60), as she claims in the play. And singing a song about the “dogs” (a slang for feet) bad with corns as “a person of the



folk”<sup>31</sup> testifies her blues philosophy that defines the blues as “a way of understanding life” shared by the black “blues people,” as Amiri Braka calls, who need the blues to help them “getting out bed in the morning” know “you ain’t alone” (83).

Wilson characterizes “Ma Rainey” as a faithful deliverer of Southern style vaudeville blues intuition in terms of content and manner of performance. “Ma listens to her heart. Ma listens to the voice inside her” (63). Doris Davis defines “the voice inside Ma’s heart” as the one that “insists on the integrity of her own music (mouths 173),” Placed in competition with the contemporary “Empress of the Blues” Bessie Smith and the ambitious trumpeter Levee in her own band, “Ma Rainey” is transformed to be a determined defender of the artistic and cultural integrity reflected in her vocal style and preference to accompany musical arrangements.

Drawing materials from the black folk experience down in the South and in the migration to her repertoire, Ma Rainey delivers her blues songs in a rough, down-home vocal style influenced by years of performing in black tent shows and minstrel troupes, incorporating vocal techniques evolved from Southern field hollers and spirituals like moaning into her frequent usage of blues notes. Also influenced by vaudeville style and country blues, Bessie Smith, who used to work with Ma Rainey as a child singer, matured quickly into a more sophisticated singer with a smoother and refiner vocal style combined with more jazz and popular elements. Often nominated as the two best known vaudeville blues singers in the 1920s, Ma Rainey established her strongest fame among

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<sup>31</sup> “Bessie was the greater blues singer, but Ma really knew these people; she was a person of the folk; she was very simple and direct,” Sterling A. Brown says in the interview with Paul Oliver when he recalls the two great singers. See Ma Rainey and the Classic blues singer, Pp. 42.

black and white Southerners while Northern audience generally appreciated a slicker and refiner manner of deliverance such as that of Bessie Smith.

As recording labels were competing with each other fiercely with their race artists, Ma Rainey undoubtedly felt the peer pressure from Bessie Smith who stepped into the recording industry a year before she did, and established her fame as “Empress of the Blues” whose records sold shockingly well to both Southern and Northern blacks and whites. Wilson dramatizes “Ma Rainey”’s rivalry with Bessie Smith via her belittling of “Moonshine Blues” by insisting on recording “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” first while her white manager Irvin requests to have “Moonshine Blues” recorded in the first place.

MA RAINEY: I ain’t doing no ”Moonshine” nothing. I’m doing the “Black Bottom” first. (74)  
Interestingly, “Moonshine Blues” is actually one of the two biggest hits (the other is “Bo-Weevil Blues”) of Ma Rainey written by herself and her debut recording with Paramount in 1924. It is technically a “drinking blues” song, since “Moonshine” refers to a type of high-proof liquor, in which the female protagonist grieves over her leaving daddy with drinking and claims to catch the first train southbound back home to settle down:

I been drinkin’ all night, babe, and the night before  
But when I get sober, I ain’t gonna drink no more  
’Cause my friend left me, standin’ in my door.  
My head goes ‘round and around, babe, since my daddy left town  
I don’t know if the river runnin’ up or down  
But there’s one thing certain, it’s mama’s going to leave town  
You’ll find me wrigglin’ and a-rockin’, howlin’ like a hound  
Catch the first train that’s runnin’ South bound.

As a song resonating with the harsh life of migrants in the North who look back to the South as relief and consolation, it sold well enough so that in 1927 Ma Rainey did record a new version with Paramount in correspondence with the rising popularity of country blues. Columbia did release Bessie Smith’s recovering of “Moonshine Blues.” Whether

Smith's version outsold that of Ma Rainey or not in real history as to make Wilson choose this song as the battlefield for Ma Rainey and her sister rival, when Cutler mentions it as "Bessie"'s song, "Ma Rainey" defends her originality fiercely in blues singing:

MA RAINEY: Bessie what? Ain't nobody thinking about Bessie. I taught Bessie. She ain't doing nothing but imitating me. What I care about Bessie? I don't care if she sell a million records. She got her People and I got mine. I don't care what nobody else do. Ma was the first and don't you forget it! Regardless of Bessie's numerous record sells, she sticks to her downhome style that appeal to her "people."

As Wilson simply touches upon "Moonshine Blues" to contextualize Ma Rainey's competition with Bessie Smith in vocal style, he forges a central plot to lay out Levee's challenge to Ma Rainey on the musical arrangement of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." "Like her voice, Ma Rainey's accompanists show the influence of both blues and minstrelsy blues," as Lieb summarizes, as "blues-styled musicians, kazoos, and jug bands" were thought "appropriate" to Ma Rainey especially in the accompaniments of the last years of her recording career (73) which coincides with the time setting of the play, 1927, a year before she ceased recording. Condemning "Ma Rainey"'s version as "some old-jug band music" (31) and "old circus bullshit" even though none of the band members play country instruments like jug or kazoo, Levee claims, "I know how to play *real* music...not this old jug-band shit. I got style!" Imposing his version of "Black Bottom" reflecting a newer style influenced by jazz and swing, which is agreed on by the white producers who regards it as "what the people want now" (62), Levee challenges Ma Rainey's authority over music, the band and the final recording of the "Black Bottom" song. However, his style together with his ambition are crushed by "Ma Rainey"'s firm declaration of playing "Black Bottom" in her old way in front of her white

manager:

MA RAINEY: I don't care what you say, Irvin. Levee ain't messing up my song. If he got what the people want, let him take it somewhere else. I am singing Ma Rainey's song. I ain't singing Levee's song. Now that's all there is to it. (62)

Eileen Crawford regards her rejection to Levee's swinging arrangements of the song as "a failure to realize the inevitability of musical change" (39). However, she is apparently aware of the threatening competition of jazz, which caters to the changing taste of the urban audience, just like her awareness of Bessie Smith's surpassing record sales. She says, "I know what he done to that song and I don't like to sing it that way" (62). Her dislike of the newer, more popular way demonstrates her decisive defense of the artistic and cultural integrity of her music indebted in her rural roots. And she is willing to pay whatever price for it, including the diminishing of her finance without the income of record-cutting fee:

Ma Rainey: [to Irvin] Now, you carry my nephew on down there . . . tell Cutler he's gonna do the voice intro on that "Black Bottom" song and that Levee ain't messing up my song with none of his music shit. Now, if that don't set right with you and Sturdyvant... then I can carry my black bottom on back down South to my tour. 'cause I don't like it up here no ways. (63)

"Black bottom" here refers to her way of performing the song, "jug-band/circus bullshit and countrified barn dance," disposed by Levee as "the peoples in the North ain't gonna buy all that tent-show nonsense" (65). However, "Ma Rainey," who "got plenty of fans" (974), holds onto her downhome style steadfastly and proudly just like her unapologetic flaunt of her sexuality, body and presence in the song. And if it is not wanted by the Northern audience Irvin and Sturdyvant wish to appeal to, she is ready to sacrifice part of her livelihood supported by record-cutting fee as to maintain her musical integrity. Such threat should not be taken as an ostensible one if the story in the play continues extends to the real history. A year later, "too set too change" estimated by record execs as Ma's

vocal style had changed little in her five-year recording career, and unwilling to accept a 50 percent cut of the standard recording fee of \$100 per side (Living blues 40), Ma Rainey withdraw from the recording industry completely. She did sizedown and went back to her tour as “Ma Rainey” claims in Wilson’s play. She sings Ma Rainey’s song, and has to sing it in her way.

As the sexual and musical competitor to “Ma Rainey,” Levee actually also listens to his heart and shares with “Ma Rainey”’s blues philosophy of “sing one’s own song” as demonstrated by the repartee between them on the confrontation between Southern vaudeville style blues and improvisational jazzy-styled blues:

MA RAINYE: Levee . . . what is that you doing? Why you playing all them notes? You play ten notes for every one you supposed to play. It don’t call for that.

LEVEE: YOU supposed to improvise on the theme. That’s what I was doing.

MA RAINYE: YOU supposed to play the song the way I sing it. The way everybody else play it. You ain’t supposed to go off by yourself and play what you want.

LEVEE: I was playing the song. I was playing it the way I feel it. “Playing it in the way” he feels it equates to “Ma Rainey”’s declaration that “I am singing Ma Rainey’s song.” Levee scorns “Ma Rainey”’s dated style but sticks to his own style in the same determination with her. He dislikes her but admires her power at the same time:

LEVEE: I’m gonna be like Ma and tell the white man just what he can do. Ma tell Mr. Irvin she gonna leave...and Mr. Irvin get down on knees and beg her to stay! That’s the way I’m gonna be! Make the white man respect me! In spite of his claim that “I ain’t no imitation nothing” (94), Levee desires to imitate “Ma Rainey”’s sexual prowess, financial affluence and power in handling the white producers via purchasing shoes out of his affordability to lure Dussie Mae and striving to show his musical talent to Sturdyvant. However, just as his inability to spell “music” correctly, Levee fails to see through the ostensible “respect” to grasp the limit of “Ma Rainey”’s power as she does.

In contrast with Levee's naivety, Wilson portrays "Ma Rainey" with a critical understanding of the nature of her "power" and the restrictions on it:

MA RAINEY: They don't care nothing about me. All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that, and they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurt them. They back there now calling me all kinds of names . . . calling me everything but a child of god. But they can't do nothing else. They ain't got what they wanted yet. As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it's just like if I'd be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on. Ain't got no use for me then. I know what I'm talking about. You watch. Irvin right there with the rest of them. He don't care nothing about me either. He's been my manager for six years, always talking about sticking together, and the only time he had me in his house was to sing for some of his friends.

Wilson gives out corresponding details in the play to attest her statement. The exec chief of the recording session Sturdyvant does not care about her, her music, and her "Roral Highness" (18) at all, as he regards the race record industry targeting at black consumers as not "respectable" (19). Likewise, her manager Irvin does not show any more respect in treating her like a "whore" to be summoned for his profit instead of a friend out of six-year collaboration. All they want is to commodify her voice lucratively while only offering her a fee other than royalty. Her voice, style and even herself are a clockwork commodity to them. Ironically, the commercialization of her voice and her style that gets hold of her southern fans empowers her to be the "handler" of the white producers and the competitor Levee. This power carves a space for her to voice out her subjectivity and superiority she can scarcely achieve outside the recording studio, before it reaches its limit—the completion of the recording session. As Wilson starts the recording session with "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" to present "Ma Rainey" as an assertive and powerful figure in terms of sexuality, affordability, and musical authority, he ends it with "Hear Me Talking to you" to signify her strategy of enacting her power: to be the controlling voice.

Released in 1928, "Hear Me Talking to you" is another song written by Ma

Rainey in which the female protagonist asserts her subjectivity over men in relationship:

Ramblin' man makes no change in me  
I'm gonna ramble back to my used-to-be

Hear me talkin' to you, I don't bite my tongue  
You want to be my man, you got to fetch it with you when you come (refrain)  
When the first battle over recording "whose version" of "Black Bottom" song

breaks out before neither Irvin or "Ma Rainey" comes into play, Cutler asks the band to rehearse "Hear Me" till the controversy on "Black Bottom" is straightened out, which forecasts the coming power struggles contending for the control voice over the recording session between "Ma Rainey" and other men in the play beyond that in sexual relationships as the lyrics indicates. Sturdyvant the exec chief, put up with "Ma Rainey"'s demanding *persona* in the recording session, wants to get her in to recorded the jazz up versions of the songs he picks out and get ride of her easily and smoothly. Irvin, her manager "who prides himself on the knowledge of blacks" wants to claim his control over "handling" them including "Ma Rainey." And Levee, the trumpeter in her band, desires to top over "Ma Rainey" via defeating her in music and sexuality. They all want to force others to hear them talking as the "boss." However, as Wilson sets "Ma Rainey" to sing the refrain lines as the closure of "Ma Rainey"'s recording session in the play, she declares herself as the controlling voice that does not bite her tongue. Realizing the duration and limits of her power, she deals with them shrewdly in respective way. She commands Sturdyvant, who does not even "respect" her ostensibly to "get on away from her [me]" (51). Meanwhile, she forces her "handling" manager Irvin to deal with everything in her way such as dealing with the police and her car repair and satisfying her requests, ranging from musical ones like song selections, recording orders, and most importantly, style and versions, to trivial ones like recording on her time and her demand

of a coke and paying her stuttering nephew like anyone else in the band. If they want to be “her men,” in this case, the producers making profits out of her records, they have to treat her like she wants to be treated. As for Levee, who keeps messing with her music and her gal with his *talking* instead of hear her talking to him, she kicks him out from “her men”—her band. To a certain extent her nagging attitude and desire to dominate caricatures her as the rude and loud stereotype of “black sapphire” aggressive to whoever shows any sign of insults or disrespect. However, her empowered independence and self-determination still stands out of her imagery. As Harry J. Elam suggest, “Wilson’s Ma does not allow herself to be objectified but uses her position as a desired musical commodity to legitimize her authority” (93). “Ma Rainey” asserts herself as the controlling voice in the recording session, pushing the boundary of racist and sexist patriarchy dominance as far as the limits allow within the in the music industry’s hierarchy. If the multi-meanings of “black bottom” are what to be expressed in her *song*, “Hear Me Talking to You” declares her unique and ultimate authority to sing it.

"I think the blues is the best literature that we as blacks have created since we've been here," Wilson said. "And it's a lot of philosophical ideas. I call it our sacred book. So what I've attempted to do is mine that field, to mine those cultural ideas and attitudes and give them to my characters" (Dyson 35). From the vaudeville branch of this inspiring “sacred book,” Wilson mines out the cultural responses of black American in the 1920s represented by black entertainers that encountered both opportunities and exploitations in the African American music craze and transfers them to his characters like “Ma Rainey” in his play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. Juxtaposing five songs of Ma Rainey culled at different times to one recording session while weaving them together by the symbolic thread of



“black bottom” that signifies her sexuality, financial independence, and musical particularity, Wilson establishes the foundation of the imagery of his “Ma Rainey” firmly on the tradition of vaudeville blues, shaping her as self-affirmative and self-determined over her sexual subjectivity and her musical integrity. His characterization also inherits the controversial presentations of stereotypical black womanhood from the history of vaudeville blues criticized by feminists, as traits of “Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire” could still be observed on the imagery of “Ma Rainey.” However, by mingling these three stock imageries of underclass black women into one female character, Wilson incarnates a fictionalized “wild Ma Rainey” with the heavy figure of “Mammy” with dismissible bisexual prowess of “Jezebel” and imposing authority of “Sapphire,” shaping her as a complicate and profound figure against these unilateral depictions of black women. Although her absence at both the beginning and ending of the play expels her from the center of the play entitled with her song as far as critics like Harry Elam and Dori Davis are concerned, Wilson presents his “Ma Rainey” as “the epitome of black female sensuality, wealth, and power” as suggested by Sandra Adell (53). While setting “Ma Rainey” sings her song in her way in the studio, Wilson gives voices to the “wild women who sing the blues” articulating a powerful resistance to patriarchal dominance of the female body and the entertainment industry while singing his blues of black sufferings in the 1920s via the play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*.

## CHAPTER 4

### ANY WOMAN'S BLUES: BESSIE SMITH AND SHERLEY ANN WILLIAMS'S

#### "ANY WOMAN'S BLUES"

##### 4.1 "A Young Woman Ain't Done Runnin' roun':" Bessie Smith and African American Literature

A trip to Newark is a career, and so I was forced to rise from the dinner table on Thanksgiving night shortly after eight o'clock if I wished to hear Bessie Smith sing at the Orpheum Theatre in that New Jersey City at a quarter of ten. I rose with eagerness, however, and so did my guests. Bessie Smith, the "Queen of the Blues," whose records sell into figures that compete with the circulation of the Saturday Evening Post, was to sing in Newark and Bessie Smith, who makes long tours of the South where her rich voice reaches the ears of the race from which she sprang, had not been heard in the vicinity of New York, save through the horn of the phonograph, for over a year.

The signs and tokens were favorable. When we gave directions to the white taxicab driver at Park Place, he demanded, "Going to hear Bessie Smith?" "Yes," we replied. "No good trying," he assured us. "You can't get in. They've been hanging on the chandeliers all the week." Nevertheless, we persevered, spurred on perhaps by a promise on the part of the management that a box would be reserved for us. We arrived, however, to discover that this promise had not been kept. It had been impossible to hold the box; the crowd was too great.

--Carl Van Vechten, "Negro 'Blues' Singers." *Vanity Fair*. March, 1926

As Sterling Brown hails Ma Rainey's appeal to people in the South in his poem, Carl Van Vechten's response testifies the craze Bessie Smith brought to the urban North such as the vicinity of New York. Applauded by Northern black fans and white patrons interested in black culture like Vechten for her besides Southern audiences, her records did outsell that of Ma Rainey in the North including New York, as indicated in Wilson's

play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Considered as the unprecedented rival to the “Mother of the blues” by Paul Oliver<sup>32</sup>, the much younger Bessie Smith was born in the city of Chattanooga, Tennessee, in conditions of extreme poverty in April 1894. The death of her parents left the burden of raising the family to the eldest sister Viola, who consented her sister’s street performing but still had to rely on the meager income she gathered. Lured by the more promising life black touring vaudeville shows offered than the ill-paid, demeaning jobs most African Americans faced, Bessie left “the shit house” (Albertson 11) in which she was raised to join the Moses Stokes company in 1912, following the steps of her brother Clarence, and thus started her bumpy ride in the show business.

For the next ten years Bessie Smith raved around in different vaudeville and minstrel troupe and cabarets, unconsciously but talentedly shaping and polishing her individual impressive style while encountering people who left indelible imprint on her life and career such as Ma Rainey, who doubtlessly influenced her style judging from her early recordings at least, whether she acknowledged it or not; Jack Gee, the man who attested the sweetness and bitterness of love in her songs; and Frank Walker, the said-to-be only white man she trusted (Albertson 31), who opened the door to Columbia’s race record division for her and supervised all her Columbia recordings as her manager.

Bessie Smith’s first recording was released by Columbia in 1923, three years after “Crazy Blues,” though by then she had made herself a seasoned singer of both pop songs and the blues in southern minstrel shows as well as northern theaters and vaudeville houses (Cohn 90). Before Columbia agreed to record her and signed her to an exclusive

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<sup>32</sup> “But really Gertrude Rainey was without a rival, save only for Bessie Smith,” as Paul Oliver claims in his pivotal book *Story of the Blues*, p. 69.

one-year contract, Smith was actually turned down by other main race record labels like Okeh and even the black-owned Black Swan due to her “very black voice” (Albertson 25). Nevertheless, her initial recordings of “Gulf Coast Blues” and “Down Hearted Blues” sold around 800,000 copies, establishing her place as one “prominent artist” on the Columbia roster (Cohan 91). She was honored by both Columbia and audiences as the "Queen of the Blues" (Tracy 315) and later “upgraded” to the "Empress of the Blues" (Albertson 19).

Smith recorded a great many of vaudeville blues hits, such as “Backwater Blues,” “St. Louis Blues,” “Empty Bed Blues” and “Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out.” With her rich contralto voice, clear diction, and her style that weaved “vaudeville style of singing, the country blues form, and certain jazz element into a perfect whole” (Stewart-Baxter 51), her popularity increased rapidly in both the race record industry and T.O.B.A tours, elevating her to a new phase of extravagant livelihood as the highest-paid black performer at least in 1924, while her senior sister singer Ma Rainey just made her recording debut with Paramount. Both of them stemmed from Southern vaudeville shows but they diverged into different routes in terms of manner of performance. If Ma Rainey was somewhat a countrified outcast to the mostly urbane Vaudeville Blues, Bessie Smith was tailor-made for the boom of this sophisticated form of paid-entertainment attributed to her jazz-blues style of singing.

Although their contemporaries like Sterling Brown considered Bessie “the greater blues singer” (Stewart-Baxter 42) as testified by “critics and collectors who have regarded Ma Rainey as one of the greatest female blues singers, second only to Bessie” (Albertson 12), I would rather take them as simply catering to a different audience. “She

got her people and I got mine” (Wilson 78), as Wilson’s “Ma Rainey” claims in the defense of her peculiar style. Unfortunately, both of them fell out of favor of their audience in the latter half of 1930s. While Ma Rainey accepted her obscurity peacefully and voluntarily retired to her Georgia home to run two small theaters in 1935, Bessie Smith was ready to reroute to the concurrent new music tides of mixing styles in the swing era, when a car crash in 1937 took her life away tragically. Her life was glamorous but short-lived, in a sense like the Vaudeville Blues boom. But in the twenties, she mostly dominated this genre as “the Empress of the blues” just like the well-known epithet she was richly deserved.

Although the contributions of her jazzy blues were not commonly acknowledged by jazz historians, she did exert a considerable influence on later significant jazz singers such as Billie Holiday who admitted Bessie, especially her phrasing, as one of her greatest influences (Stewart-Baxter 48). On the literature track, generations of black writers have remembered her and her music literally or literarily: Langston Hughes hails “the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith” as the testimony of the cultural value of the “lowbrow” worthwhile to be heard and understood by the closed ears of the black intellectuals in his article “The Negro Artist and Racial Mountain” (1926); Richard Wright analyses Bessie Smith and her songs “Empty Bed Blues” in his unpublished essay “Memories of My Grandmother” (2021) ; James Baldwin celebrates Bessie Smith alongside with Billie Holiday as his “tragic, natural muses whose work he must translate to the general public and mediate through the “high art” forms of his own fiction and essays” (Lordi 100). While most of them refer to Bessie Smith and her music as a valuable cultural existence or an inspirational resource, Sherley Anne Williams writes

Bessie Smith and her songs directly into poetry. In this chapter, I mean to explore the poems taking the structure of the Vaudeville Blues form by Williams in relation to corresponding songs by Bessie Smith, to demonstrate how Williams carries on and develops the tradition of Vaudeville Blues in terms of articulating black women's inner voices as their own songs.

#### **4.2 “Every Woman is a Victim of the Feel of Blues, too:” Sherley Anne Williams and her “Any Woman’s Blues” Cycle**

Ten years before Wilson firstly staged his dramatized revitalization of Ma Rainey at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Connecticut in 1982, his contemporary black female writer and critic Sherley Anne Williams regretted that black music and black musicians were “generally touched upon lightly and rarely explored as a theme deserving of individual and primary treatment” when “used in literature as vehicles for thematic development or as subject matter” (Williams, 136). Also indebted to the blues as a philosophy of black life like August Wilson, Sherley Anne Williams eases her concerns of the marginalization of black music and musicians in literature with her own poetry paying homage to Bessie Smith and her songs. Many of her poems are inspired by the blues music, such as a poem in *Peacock Poems* titled “Any Woman’s Blues” which is patently inspired by blues singer Bessie Smith’s song “Any Woman’s Blues” in both form and content. Smith’s “Any woman’s blues” publicizes black working-class women’s private sexuality as communal experience, empowering them with independence and autonomy even in the form of violence. Accordingly, Williams’ poem carries on the political tradition of affirming women’s subjectivity and control over their sexuality and mobility from Smith’s song, and extends it into the pursuit of identity from the female

perspective. Through adapting the classic AAB structure of the blues lyric and the blues philosophy of “hope” in poetry, Williams also confirms the centrality of the blues tradition to the aesthetics and creativity of African American writers as both a resource and also a direct form of “high art.”

As one of the pioneer writers of “neo-slave narratives,” Sherley Anne Williams gained first recognition as a poet. Both of her collections of poetry were nominated for the National Book Award, while the first collection *Peacock Poems* also garnered nominations for the Pulitzer Prize. In her article “Returning to the Blues: Esther Phillips and Contemporary Blues Culture,” Williams documented how she became interested in the blues. At her young age her “little middle-class aspiring soul” actually “dismissed” the blues as associating with “promiscuity, gambling, fighting and drunkenness” (Williams: 1991, 818) even though her elder sister and her friends adored it. Her first delving into the blues was “an act of quiet rebellion against cultural nationalists” who identified the blues as “morose songs” (819) reminding people of slavery. It was then that she recanted her earlier disdain for the blues and began her study on “the formal aspects, the structures and verbal strategies of re-corded blues songs from the twenties through the late sixties” (820). Williams says, “I focused on the familiar AAB song patterns of the classic blues shouters of the twenties and thirties—Ma Rainey, the Smith girls, Clara, Mamie, the fabulous Bessie, as a way of organizing what I was hearing” (820). In return, she renders what she hears from them, “the fabulous Bessie” in particular, into poetic aspirations from which her poems like “Any Woman’s Blues” flow from.

“Any Woman’s Blues” was originally recorded by Bessie Smith in 1923, the year when she first hit the recording industry. Though it was not as “hot” as “Down Hearted

Blues” at that time, the song was actually produced by an influential cast, composed by Lovie Austin, who ranked together with Lil Hardin Armstrong as “two of the best female jazz blues piano players of the period” (Santelli 20), sung by Columbia’s new race record star Bessie Smith, and accompanied by Fletcher Henderson, who was ranked alongside Duke Ellington as one of the most influential arrangers and band leaders in jazz history. The song was composed of a 20-bar introduction followed by three 12-bar stanzas.

My man ain't acting right, he stays out late at night  
And still he says he loves no one but me  
But if I find that gal, that tries to steal my pal  
I'll get her told, just you wait and see  
I feel blue, I don't know what to do  
Every woman in my fix is bound to feel blue too, 'cause

I love my man better than I love myself  
Lord, I love my man better than I love myself  
And if he don't have me, he won't have nobody else

My man got teeth like, a lighthouse on the sea  
My man got teeth like, a lighthouse on the sea  
And every time he smiles, he throws them lights on me

His voice sound like chimes, I mean the organ kind  
His voice sound like chimes, I mean the organ kind  
And every time he speak, his music ease my troubling mind

In the introductory stanza, the persona lays out the cause of her blue feelings: an unfaithful male lover who stays out late, probably with some other woman, while lies to her that “he loves no one but her [me]”. Thematically, this song is another example of the typical vaudeville blues songs concerned about intimate relationship. Love has been one prominent theme of the blues music, including women’s blues in 1920s and 1930s. However, the “love” that filled the blues had little of the romanticized sentimentality of the “love” prevailing in the mainstream popular songs of the American society of the time. According to Angela Davis, the popular song formula of the period demanded a



“saccharine” and “etherealized” ideology of love (Davis 3), banishing those imperfect and immoral possibilities in intimate relationships such as infidelity, abandonment and domestic violence. Music historian Samuel Charters, who widely published on the subjects of blues and jazz music since the 1960s, argued such an “distortion” of the ideal of love actually harmed people since there would be a long and heart-breaking struggle before the adolescent was able to “reconcile” his or her real experiences with the “unreal dream” of love portrayed in popular songs (Charters 37). In contrast, the blues music was never ashamed of exposing the imperfections of in relationship like a cheating and dishonest partner, as in “Any Woman’s Blues.”

However, though the female protagonist in “Any Woman’s Blues” moans about her mistreating man, she is not obsessed in her pain. Instead, she is clear-minded enough to realize the existence of some “gal” trying to “steal” her pal. Smith’s stretching and melisma of the vowel syllable of “find” and “steal” reveals how angry the female persona was against the rival stealing her man, as to threaten her to “wait and see” via vocally emphasizing the words “her” and “just.” The threat is continued in the last line of the next stanza: if her man abandons her, she would not let him have anyone else. Davis interprets the competition among women for the same man in the blues as an exercising of working-class women’s “agency” to some degree over the choice of their sexual partners. This sovereignty over the choice of sexual partners served as an important marker dividing slavery and emancipation, shaping sexuality into “one of the most tangible domains” (Davis 4) in which black people, including black women, expressed their freedom from chattel slavery. Both Samuel Charters and Angela Davis regard the blues as a form developing simultaneously with the new experience of freed black men and

women, giving musical expressions to the new social, historical and sexual realities they encountered. In this sense, jealousy as well as rivalry in relationship frequently sung in vaudeville blues songs, such as in “Any Woman’s blues,” could also be read as an amplified expression of freedom in the aspect of sexual autonomy of underclass black people, who were now free to choose their spouse in the post-slavery era, even flirting with and stealing someone else’s partner.

Nevertheless, the female persona’s threat in Smith’s “Any Woman’s Blues” is only vaguely suggested by telling the female rival to “just wait and see” rather than describing her plan for vengeance. Her threat seems to imply potentially harsh violence either toward the mistreating man or on the female rival. Many songs by vaudeville blueswomen foster images of “wild” women firing violence against female rivals or the disloyal men. To take an example, the female persona in Ma Rainey’s “Rough and Tumbling Blues” beats and even kills other female competitors (figure 51). And the female protagonist in Victoria Spivey’s “Blood-Thirsty Blues” claims to have killed her man as reflected in the bloody scene of murder in the affiliated advertisement (figure 65). The legitimization of violence enacted by black women in Vaudeville Blues is undoubtedly problematic, contributing partly to the contemporary belittling of this music as being “evil/devilish” by black bourgeois. However, the possibility and capability of practicing violence demonstrated in these songs also empower women, especially those trapped in a bad relationship, dragging them out temporarily from the mud of sexual and patriarchal victimization.

Through this controversially exaggerated model of “violent women,” women’s blues also affirms women’s autonomy and independence over sexual matters. Adam

Gussow terms the “gun-and-blade-borne damage black folk inflict” on each other stirred by reasons like sexual jealousy as “intimate violence,” an “essential” if sometimes “destructive” way in which black people articulated their “somebodiness” and “indelible individuality” (Gussow 5). They were not stock stereotypes like “Uncle” and “Mammy” any more after the abolition of slavery. Instead, they saw themselves as individuals with different personalities who were ready and yearned for the opportunity to prove their particular “somebodiness,” even in competition with each other. This locus of violence, or the fantasy of violence revealed in blues lyrics, including that of Vaudeville Blues, was an important site that allowed the embodiment of this self-empowerment of black people, of black women in particular in the case of women’s blues.

According to black feminist Hazel Carby’s groundbreaking analysis of the sexual politics of women’s blues, “the rage of women against male infidelity and desertion is evident in many of the blues” (O’Meally 478). Ironically, no matter how enraged she is, the female persona in Smith’s “Any Woman’s Blues” continues to express her melancholy and disconcertedness since she “loves the mistreating man more than herself.” But why does a woman still love such a bad man? The last two stanzas explain the reason via two similes: because of “his lighthouse-like teeth” and “chime-like voice.” These two images of male attractiveness are commonly used in blues lyrics, but Bessie Smith has her own interpretative way to deliver a typical Vaudeville Blues song written by professional songwriters like Lovie Austin. When Smith sings the teeth-stanza, she puts special emphasis on the word “lighthouse.” She pauses right after the word “like,” creating a suspension that makes the audience eager to know what kind of teeth this man has. What’s more, she also stretches the time she spends on the word “lighthouse”

especially “-house” part. The lure of a man with teeth like a “lighthouse” to a woman is again delayed by the repetition of the first line of the stanza. When the resolution line finally comes out, the audience must be waiting anxiously to recover the charm of a lighthouse-teethed man. A lighthouse on the sea, which is utilized to signaling directions for ships, is supposed to be very bright and shiny so the crew can see it. When a man with such shiny teeth smiles brightly at a woman and puts her in spotlight, she would probably be attracted like the female persona who feels the lights is “thrown” on her. Furthermore, the upright gesture of lighthouse symbolizing an aroused penis seems to hint implicitly at the man’s sexual prowess. A similar emphasis is put on the man’s voice that sounds like “a chime of organ kind.” The organ is a keyboard instrument frequently used in a church with a long, sweet sound. The voice of this man while speaking is compared to “music” easing the woman’s “troubling mind,” which can also be regarded as a hint of the sexual pleasure she gets from him, since sexual pleasure would ease people’s pressure to some extent. Both the bright smile and the sweet voice of the man hint at his sexual attractiveness. As she spends the time for two stanzas to illustrate why she is still keeping this two-time man, the emphasis of the song sort of shifts from the lament over a “mistreater” to a woman’s elaboration of her sexual satisfaction.

Vaudeville blues sung by blues women like Bessie Smith embraced the bold exposure of women’s sexual desire and pleasure, reclaiming their bodies for themselves instead of subjugating to men’s sexual desire thus placing women’s role comparatively equal to that of men at least in terms of sexual enjoyment in relationships. They put themselves at the center of their sexual pleasure, instead of surrendering to a patriarchal discourse that claims control over their bodies and sexuality. By depicting such a

“tough” and “wild” image of working-class black women, women’s blues put forward a cultural and political struggle for affirming women’s sexual subjectivity via bold presentations of female sexual desire against the “objectification of female sexuality within a patriarchal order” (O’Meally 474).

Like most Vaudeville Blues songs, Smith’s “Any Woman’s Blues” is also a song of a woman’s lament concerning a dishonest partner. Conventionally, such matters as sexual obsession and infidelity, especially from a woman’s perspective in intimate relationships, were confined to a “private” sphere. By lamenting about personal love affairs in the public realm due to the vast audience of blues music, the song breaks the boundary of “domesticity” on women, taking their sensuality and sexuality from a private sphere to a public terrain. The notion of the concurrent period which defined a “true” woman by “domesticity” and “purity” was patriarchal in itself since it suppressed women’s access to public realms and their blunt enjoyment of their own bodies by representing them as only good wives and mothers. Therefore, by publicizing some woman’s personal difficulty, women’s blues file a public complaint, if still far from any organized “protest” yet, against the oppression on women’s sensuality and sexuality by a sociological patriarchal order. Blues critics like Charters argue that there is “little protest” in the blues, just “anger and frustration” (Charters 98). However, the public complaint filled with anger and frustration articulated in the blues can be seen as “a form of contestation of oppressive conditions, even when it lacks a dimension of organized political protest” (Davis 101).

“Any Woman’s Blues” sung by Smith talks about what happens to the female persona, but it is not just about any specific woman. Though it starts with the female

persona's moaning over her individual tragedy in love affair, it soon expands the coverage of the melancholy in the introduction part over all women under a similar circumstance by claiming that "Every woman in my fix is bound to feel blue too." The transformation from "individual" to "communal" is achieved by ambiguous descriptions of both men and women without any identifying details in the lyric. Consequently, any woman who ever had or is having a man who stays out late and lies could put their feet in these shoes since they are all bound to feel the same blues. In this way, this blues song creates a mood which any women can related themselves to, responding to it while listening and consoled by the sharing process itself, to sing the blues as to "drive the blues away" (Davis 135). In sum, women's blues such as Bessie Smith's "Any Women's blues" carves out a space for working-class women to express their "agonies, joys and aspirations" (135) publicly and boldly, confirm their comparative independence and autonomy over their sexuality, experience themselves as a community to keep from obsessing in pain, but instead, to confront all difficulties with strength, sometimes leading to violence despite their troubling minds.

According to Steven Tracy, "blues poetry" can refer to either highly poetic lyrics of the blues or to poetry that employs the oral blues tradition lyrically or musically (Ostrom 160). Williams praises Langston Hughes as one of the few African American poets who made a great attempt to utilize "the deceptively simple" (Harper 126) classic blues structure of AAB stanza pattern. In contrast, Samuel Charters argues the three-line verse form is a unique poetic form within which have developed "the richest strains of blues poetry" (Charters 17) besides the usage of profound sexual images and various poetic rhetorics like simile and metaphor. Just like Hughes's "Young Gal's Blues,"

Williams' poem "Any Woman's Blues" is also another example of "an oral form" of classic blues moving nearly "unchanged into literary tradition" (Harper 126).

Sherley Anne Williams puts two poems titled "Any Woman's blues" in *Peacock Poems*. The first one appearing at the very beginning of the collection is the last verse of "One-Sided Bed Blues" that Williams developed into a full poem in *Some One Sweet Angel Chile*. This poem seems to hint at a closer association to Bessie Smith's song "Empty Bed Blues" instead of her "Any Woman's Blues." Therefore, I am going to focus on the second "Any Women's Blues" which suggests more patent intertextuality with Smith's song "Any Women's Blues." Williams' poem consists four six-line stanzas:

Any Woman's Blues  
*every woman is a victim of the feel blues, too.*

Soft lamp shinin  
    and me alone in the night.  
Soft lamp shinin  
    and me alone in the night.  
Can't take no one beside me  
    need mo'n jest some man to set me right.

I left many people and places  
    tryin not to be alone.  
Left many a person and places  
    I lived my life alone.  
I need to get myself together.  
    Yes, I need to make myself to home.

What's gone can be a window  
    a circle in the eye of the sun.  
What's gone can be a window  
    a circle, well, in the eye of the sun.  
Take the circle from the world, girl,  
    you find the light have gone.

These is old blues  
    and I sing em like any woman do.  
These the old blues  
    and I sing em, sing em, sing em. Just like any woman do.

My life ain't done yet.

Naw. My song ain't through. (Williams: 1975, 25)

The title of the poem “Any Woman’s Blues” is taken directly from Smith’s song. And the “subtitle,” the italicized line “*every woman is a victim of the feel blues, too...*” also corresponds with the line “Every woman in my fix is bound to feel blue too” in Smith’s song. The word “too” is used in Smith’s song because the female persona has stated her own case so that other women experiencing the same problem will feel blues “too,” which makes it worth the title “Any Woman’s Blues.” However, the italicized line in William’s poem is almost the first “line” of the poem, thus leaving no precedents for it to follow suit. In this sense, the “*too*” probably suggests some precedent outside the text. Then the last verse hints at the source: it is an “old blues” song, and “I” sing em like “any woman” does. Smith’s “Any Woman’s Blues” could well be the very “old blues” song sung by any woman who has the same blue feeling like the personas in the song and the poem. And via adapting the title and certain lines improvisationally, Williams cements her poetic response in this poem to Bessie Smith’s song.

Though the intertextuality between Smith’s song and Williams’ poem can hold water to a great degree, they are still two individually different productions. The female persona in Smith’s song feels blues because her man is not acting right, while the persona in Williams’ poem claims that she needs “mo’n jest some man” to set her right. The former is obsessed with her man as his voice can ease her “troubling mind” without revealing what on earth troubles her. In contrast, the latter is blunter in claiming that having a man is not sufficient to console her. This difference lies less in the importance of sex in women’s lives but more in the change of historical and social context. In the 1920s when Smith sang the song the recording industry was just opened up to African



Americans, ostensibly privileging black women over black men but also put them under a public racist and sexist gaze. In order to maintain such a “privileged” survival channel, both women composers like Lovie Austin and singers like Smith would not risk their opportunities of any reckless complaint or protest on the society. With contrast to the ambiguity of women’s predicament in the song, the female persona feels much less pressure in expressing her morass, since women already began to “speak publicly about their plights in the early 1970s” (Davis 25) when Williams published her poetry.

William’s poem generally follows the AAB structure typically used in the Vaudeville Blues lyrics which is a line sung, repeated and then completed by a different line with end rhyme (Ostrom 161). Repetition in blues is rarely “word by word,” according to Williams (Harper 127). She also identifies some techniques of “worrying the line” including changes in stress, pitch and word order, the addition of exclamatory phrases and repetitions of phrases within the line itself (127), most of which take place in the poem “Any Woman’s Blues.” In the first stanza the verb marker of present progressive tense “is” is added before “shining,” emphasizing the “present” of the personal’s loneliness as reflected by a single lamp and an empty bed. In the second stanza the action of “tryin not to be alone” is replaced by “I lived my life alone,” indicating the failure of lifelong endeavor to drive away the loneliness. In the third stanza, the repeated line is cut into two by a common exclamatory “well,” which delays the appearance of resolution line and adds up to the suspenseful effect. At last, the phrase “sing em” is repeated three times in the second line of the last stanza. If this poem was sung by some singer, the pitches and stresses of these repetitious phrases might be quite different. By adding three layers of emphasis on the behavior of singing “the same old blues song,” the

poem shows generations of women are experiencing similar hardships as to be “bound to feel blue.” At the same time, it also proves the realistic and artistic values of the blues as an important way of self-expression of women, since it is sung by “any woman” for years. With the slightly altered repetition of the first line of every stanza, there is a new emphasis of the meaning of the repeated line which also adds upon the suspension created by the delayed completion of the stanza.

If the repetition of the first line in Williams’ poem emphasizes the meaning of the line, the comparisons set up within line or stanza in the first two stanzas intensify and dramatize the emphasized meaning or theme. In the first stanza, a lamp that is “soft” in the night connotes a kind of warm tenderness, in the context of which the loneliness of the female persona appears sharper and more hurting. In such a lonely night, even the company of a lover cannot soothe her melancholy. Then the following stanza explains what she yearns for beyond a man via a comparison of “places” and “home.” The female persona has been traveling to multiple “places,” only to find the only place she needs is “home,” a unique space where she can get rid of the loneliness. The plural forms of “places” with contrast to the singer “home” tells us “home” is not where you can go but where you can stay. What the female persona seeks for wandering from place to place is a sense of belonging, a place or a space she can identify with.

Though the personal laments on her loneliness and rootlessness, the poem is not just an expression of melancholy and pain. It also affirms the female persona’s independence and autonomy over her life, sexuality and mobility via the very process of “leaving people and places.” Leaving “people” has an obvious designation to multiple sexual partners, asserting her total control over her sexuality. And “leaving places” of

course suggests her free access to the road. Above all, these journeys of leaving people or places are self-initiated and the “home” is going to be made by “[my]herself,” which indicate the female persona’s independence and her autonomy over her life. William’s poem does no longer focus on the two tangible realms, mobility and sexuality, where black working-class women practiced their freedom as presented as much as blues women’s blues songs of the 1920s like Smith’s “Any Woman’s Blues” does. Instead, its emphasis is shifted to the pursuit of identity and sense of belonging while enjoying freedom in sexuality and mobility. Anyway, no matter how blue the female person is, she still believes in “hope” essential to the blues philosophy (Ostrom 159): since her life “ain’t done yet, and her song “ain’t through,” there is always a chance of making herself a “home” at a certain place, a possibility that “the sun is gonna shine in my backdoor someday.”

Similar to Smith’s song, Williams’ poem does not stay on the individual level but also expand it to a communal coverage. Via titling the poem as “Any Woman’s” blues together with the repetitive emphasis on “sing em just like any woman do,” the personal makes an assumption that her audience or readers, in particular women, share the same reality with her. In addition, the sudden shift of first-person narrative voice “I” to second person “you” as a group name addressing to “girls,” the personal is acting her role as an “advisor” (Davis 42) while establishing an imagined female community with same experiences in the past, at present and in the future. Charters interprets the “direct, immediate” relationship of the blues to black people’s experience as a marker of one poetic characteristics of the blues that is essential to all art (Charters 12). Nevertheless, he goes too far in taking the singer or performer for granted as the persona in the song.

Although the singer does not necessarily experience the same thing happening in the song, while Bessie Smith sings “Any Woman’s blues,” she adopts a professional persona narrating a woman’s personal difficulties and reaches for communal response at the same time in the assumption that “Every woman in my fix is bound to feel blues, too”. In a similar way, Williams’ the poem takes “the particularized and individual experience” of women into communal scope, via the emphasis on the “feel blues” that victimizes “every woman” resonated by the shift of narrative voice from “I” to “you,” transforming the voice of an individual woman to that of African American women and even further, of all women.

According to Paul Garon, the blues is the musical and poetic expression of working-class black Americans (Garon 2). Whether the blues music, especially Vaudeville Blues sung by women, represented authentic or just evoked “the fantastic” (DuCille 72) like any other form of art, it is a doubtlessly rich musical and literary legacy and resource to generations of musicians and writers. In the 1920s, blues queens like Bessie Smith lamented over the imperfections in relationships, while at the same time confirming working-class black women’s independence and autonomy over their sexuality and presenting them as active sexual subjects other than subordinated objects to sexism and racism. Fifty years later, women writers like Sherley Anne Williams picked up the classic form of this music genre again like their male precedents Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown did, and transformed it directly into a literary and poetic form. Her poem also takes over the exclamation of women’s autonomy over their sexuality and mobility in blues songs and goes further to broaden this autonomy into other realms, such as the pursuit of identity and senses of belonging in the process of looking for a “home.”

Both Smith's song and Williams' poem elevate personal experiences into a communal level, confronting shared predicament and plight with a belief in the blues philosophy of hope, as "the complex interweaving of general and specific, individual and group" in blues songs "finds no direct correspondence in Afro-American literature except in the literary blues" or the blue poetry (Harper 130). Williams regards the blues and blues poetry as an expressive form "more concerned with self instead of society and its values" (Harper 132), whereas Davis insists anger and frustration can also be seen as contestations of oppressive conditions despite the lack of a dimension of organized political protest (Davis 101). Whether personal complaint in blues songs and blues poems can be taken as a form of social protest or not, poetry written by poets in the fashion of a highly bluesy language or structure marks "the beginning of a new tradition built on a synthesis of black oral traditions and Western literate form" (Harper 135).

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION: A JOY BORN FROM ANGUISH

Now, I am claiming a great deal for the blues; I'm using them as a metaphor. . . . I want to talk about the blues, not only because they speak of this particular experience of life and this state of being, but because they contain the toughness that manages to make this experience articulate. . . . And I want to suggest that the acceptance of this anguish one finds in the blues, and the expression of it, creates also, however odd this may sound, a kind of joy.

--James Baldwin, "The Uses of the Blues."

As the excerpted monologue above states, Baldwin understands the blues as the articulation of black experience and their state of being, which would be echoed by August Wilson and Sherley Anne Williams, both of which claim that the blues as the philosophy of black life on the American continent. The blues is the embodiment of black experience, and Vaudeville blues, a mainly commercial genre based on paid-entertainment and record sales, is of no exception.

For a brief period in the 1920s, the authentic black sound of the Vaudeville Blues swept the country. As it articulates the agonies and grievances black people had lived with before the Great Migration while simultaneously capturing the voices of the new migrants who rushed into cities for an ostensible better future but only found themselves trapped in no less but new means of economic exploitation and racial discrimination. But this time is black women's turn to be the spokeswoman. Blues queens like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith lamented over the imperfections in relationships as well as the hardships and injustices entangled them as both black and women. Although the white-dominated recording industry gave them the chance to be recorded merely for their high profit potentials, black vaudeville blueswomen seized this unprecedented opportunity to raise to stardom and thus secured a space for the voice and awareness of underclass black

women to be heard. Their names, their extravagant attire as well as their songs were widely circulated, South and North alike, via the advertisements put by recording labels on principle African American Newspapers such as *the Chicago Defender*.

It is a “ground-breaking” experience for the mostly white-owned record companies endeavoring to advertise a new genre of black music (the Vaudeville Blues) to a new consumer market (black only), neither of which they fully understood. This uncertainty mingled with eagerness to win potential black customers out of fierce business competition led to ambiguity and contradiction in the advertising displays of many vaudeville blues numbers of the time.<sup>33</sup> Once can never expect the white copywriters of these ads to understand the dynamics and complexity of the “wildness” of working-class black women that prevailed in many songs by vaudeville blueswomen even with the help of black consultants, out of their racist and sexist gaze. Nevertheless, their careful attempts to caricature the content of the songs with prevailing stereotypes but in a comic way while crowning the singers themselves did create ambiguity in the presentation of the imagery of black women. It was through this ambiguity, which blurred the demarcation between “vulgarity” and “respectability,” that vaudeville blueswomen were able to express their joy born from the mire of anguish. Despite of the risk of being bounded to stock images of “Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire,” they made access to a public arena in which they confirmed working-class black women’s confidence, independence, and autonomy over their sexuality, presenting them as subjective sexual beings, instead of subordinated objects to sexism and racism, and asserting their power and rights as black women with limitations via their songs and

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<sup>33</sup> See Jeff Tilton’s *Early Down-Home Blues*, 226.

performances. Regardless of the short-lived boom of vaudeville blues, the image of these independent and assertive female blues singers is still inspirational to black writers like August Wilson and Sherley Anne Williams after fifty years from their peak in the American popular culture.

August Wilson does not only capture the ideas and attitudes of black people on their life and being revealed in Ma Rainey's blues, but also decodes the racist oppression and economical exploitation in the process of recording her blues via his play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. As black people were targeted as an untapped lucrative market for record sales, black female blue singers like Ma Rainey together with their voices were transformed into a sensual commodity wrapped up in the 78s, while white producers, who took up the majority of the profit, did not ever need to cast an eye on their individuality nor their artistry. When black males as represented by the male band members almost "die" in the wrestling against white dominance in the recording studio due to their inability to fight against it, Wilson incarnates "Ma Rainey" as the symbol of black female sexuality, wealth, and power who battles with white authority over selling her voice, using her "black bottom," the signifier of her body, sexuality, presence and musical integrity, as the leverage. Intuitive of the exploitative nature of recording making business, she is the one who knows the rules, plays the game well but don't believe in it.

Wilson demonstrates the joy of temporary empowerment "Ma Rainey" acquires in the anguish of economic exploitation and racial humiliation in the recording studio. However, his characterization of "Ma Rainey" also stimulates disturbing pain to some critics. The play is entitled as "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" but "Ma Rainey" herself is not the center of the conflict, as Wilson apparently spends more time and energy in



exploring the mindsets and philosophies of the male band members. As Harry Elam claims, Wilson's "Ma Rainey" is "dichotomously empowered and silenced," due to the lack of authority of "a signature monologue that voices her inner sentiments in the ways that the male figures are enabled to speak their personal histories" (Elam 99-100). As a result, Elam defines her as an "interrupter" (99) rather than an instigator of the action of the play. However, whether she interrupts or instigates the flow of the play, Ma Rainey is characterized as a tough manipulator able to seize every opportunity to assert her rights and empower herself within a temporary space bound by racism and sexism. Her toughness seems to be overwhelming to Frank Rich, who claimed "Ma Rainey" as "both a heroine and a monster," in his response article to the staging of the play at the Yale Repertory Theater in 1984<sup>34</sup>, and also to Ma Rainey's cousin, Ella Mae Sanders, who considered the play "kind of vulgar" and did not have much to do with the real Ma Rainey as "she was not foul-mouthed."<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, August Wilson did manage to revitalize "Ma Rainey" from the obscurity, bringing her from the outdated stage of Vaudeville Blues to that of drama, and later to that of Broadway Ma Rainey herself never claimed via the over two hundred performances.

Wilson attributes his inability to make a woman at the center stage of his works to the fact that "I am a man, and because of the ground on which I stand and the viewpoint from which I perceive the world" (Shannon 139 conversations). If his gender hinders him from getting into "the inner sentiments" of Ma Rainey, Sherley Anne Williams, as a black female poet, endeavors to render the sufferings *any* black woman may encounter,

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/04/11/arts/theater-ma-rainey-s-black-bottom.html>

<sup>35</sup> Bethel, Judith. "'Ma Rainey's cousin recalls life on the road with blues singer.'" Courtesy the blues archive.

and the transcendences over such plights as both black and female from the inner voices of black women to poetic exclamations in her poems represented by “Any Woman’s Blues.” Obtaining the theme, structure, language, idioms from Bessie Smith’s song with the same title, as well as inserting personalized images and techniques like “worrying the line,” Williams carries on the tradition of self-assertiveness and self-affirmation in Vaudeville Blues, and transforms it into her own *song* in poetic form centering on the pursuit of identity and sense of belonging. Similar to Smith’s song, Williams’ poetry also laments on the anguish caused by loneliness in relationship from the female perspective. However, a joy can still be captured in the articulation of a woman’s individual pain which causes understanding and supportive resonance in the communal terrain. As the deeper anguish lies in the very fact that till now every woman is still a “victim” of the feel of the blues, there also comes the deeper joy of knowing that we are not alone in singing it. Our lives ain’t done yet, and our songs ain’t through.

APPENDIX

CITED ADVERTISEMENTS AND LYRICS








**WOOD'S THEATRE**  
Regularly Established for the Season as a Temple of Minstrelsy  
Manager and Proprietor,.....W. W. NEWCOMB  
**TUESDAY Evening, Oct. 29th, 1867.**  
INCREASED ATTRACTION WITH THE POPULAR  
**NEWCOMB'S**  
SECOND APPEARANCE OF  
**DICK PARKER!**  
The Celebrated Ethiopian Comedian,  
   
     
IN HIS WONDERFUL  
**ECCENTRICITIES!**  
**SUCCESS UNABATED!** 

Figure 1. Newcomb's Minstrels, New York, Oct. 29, 1867.  
(Courtesy Harvard Theatre Collection.)



Figure 2. Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix Ad



Figure 3. Gold Dust Washing Powder Advertisement 1909.



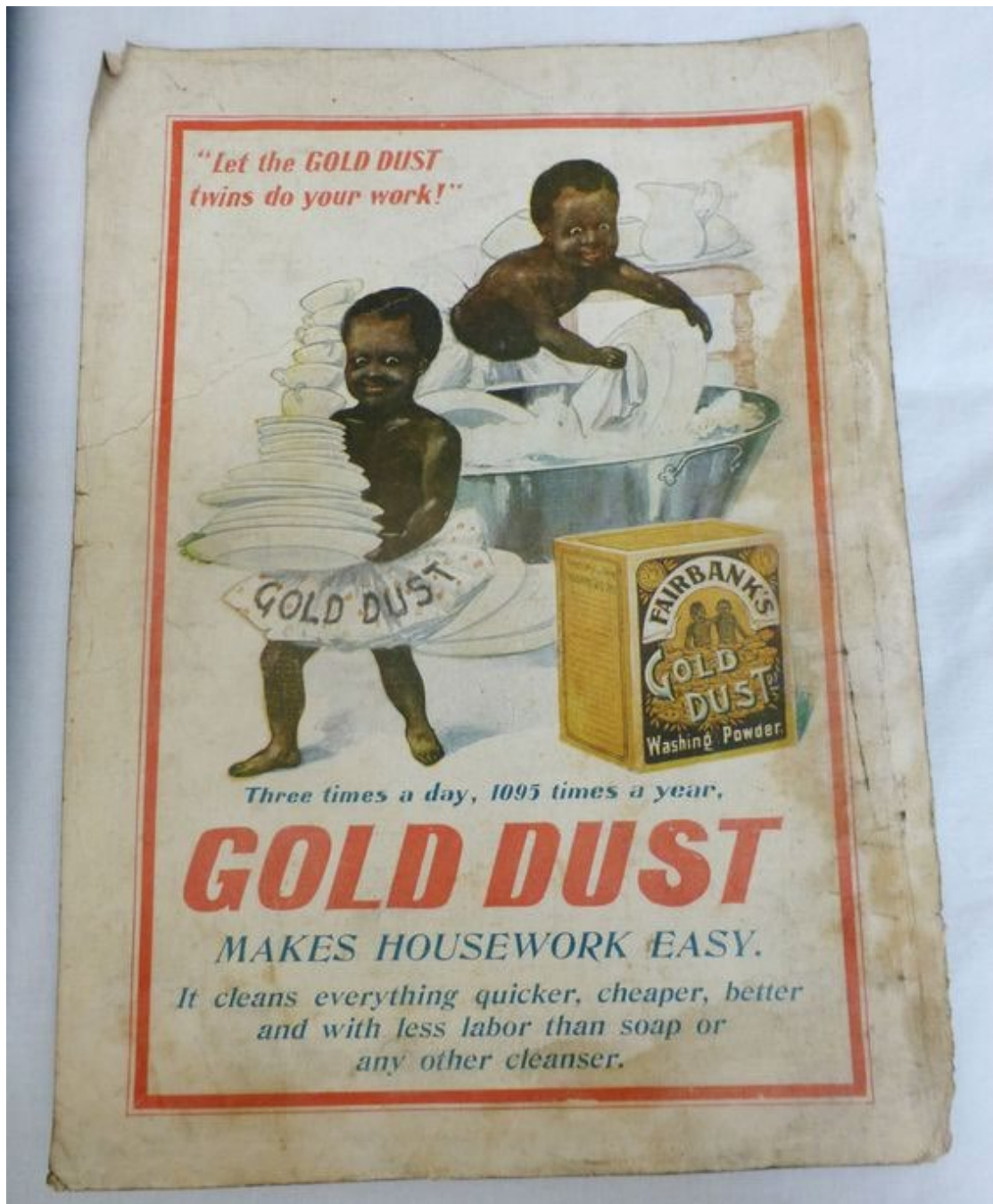


Figure 4. Vintage 1900's Gold Dust Twins Washing Powder Paper Advertising.  
(Courtesy *Collecting Black Americana.*)



Figure 5. Lithographed Cardboard Nursery Toy  
(Advertising giveaway, late 19th century.) Collection of/photo by Evelyn Ackerman.  
(Courtesy *Collecting Black Americana.*)





Figure 6. Sheet Music Cover for "Zip Coon."





Figure 7. The Original Jim Crow.

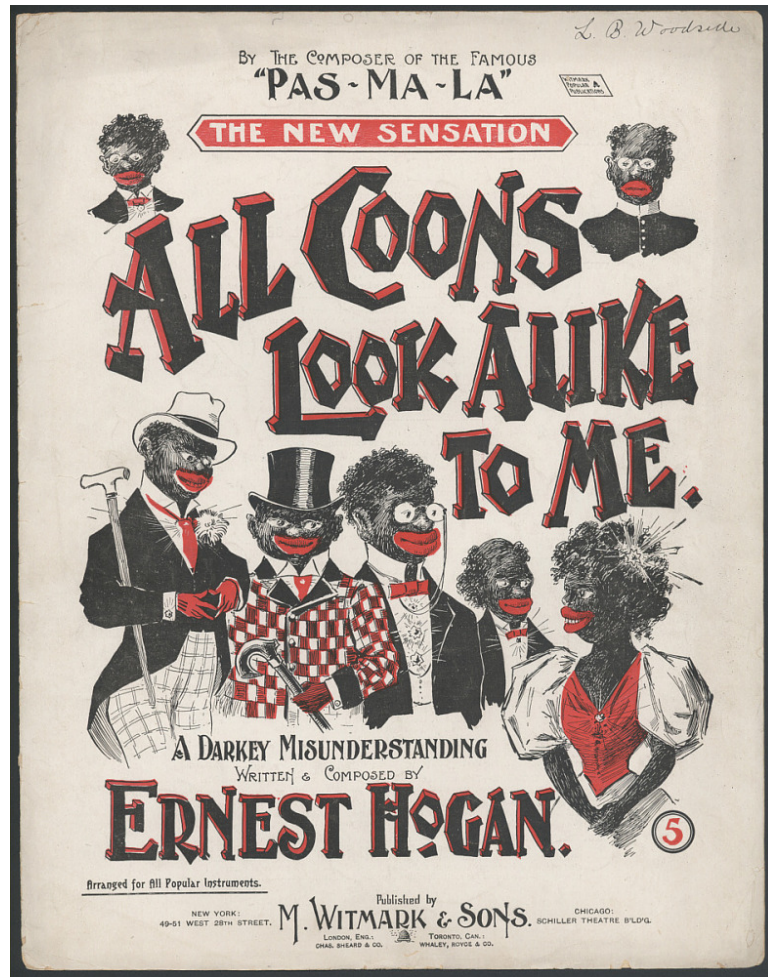


Figure 8. Sheet Music Cover of "All Coons Look Alike to Me: A Darkey Misunderstanding."  
 Hogan, Ernest. (New York (49-51 W. 28th St., New York): M. Witmark & Sons, c1896.)



Figure 9. Victor Advertisement of White “Coon Shouters” Including May Irwin and Clarice Vance. (Excerpted from the booklet of Archeophone’s CD *The High Priestess of Jollity & The Southern Singer* released in 2011.)



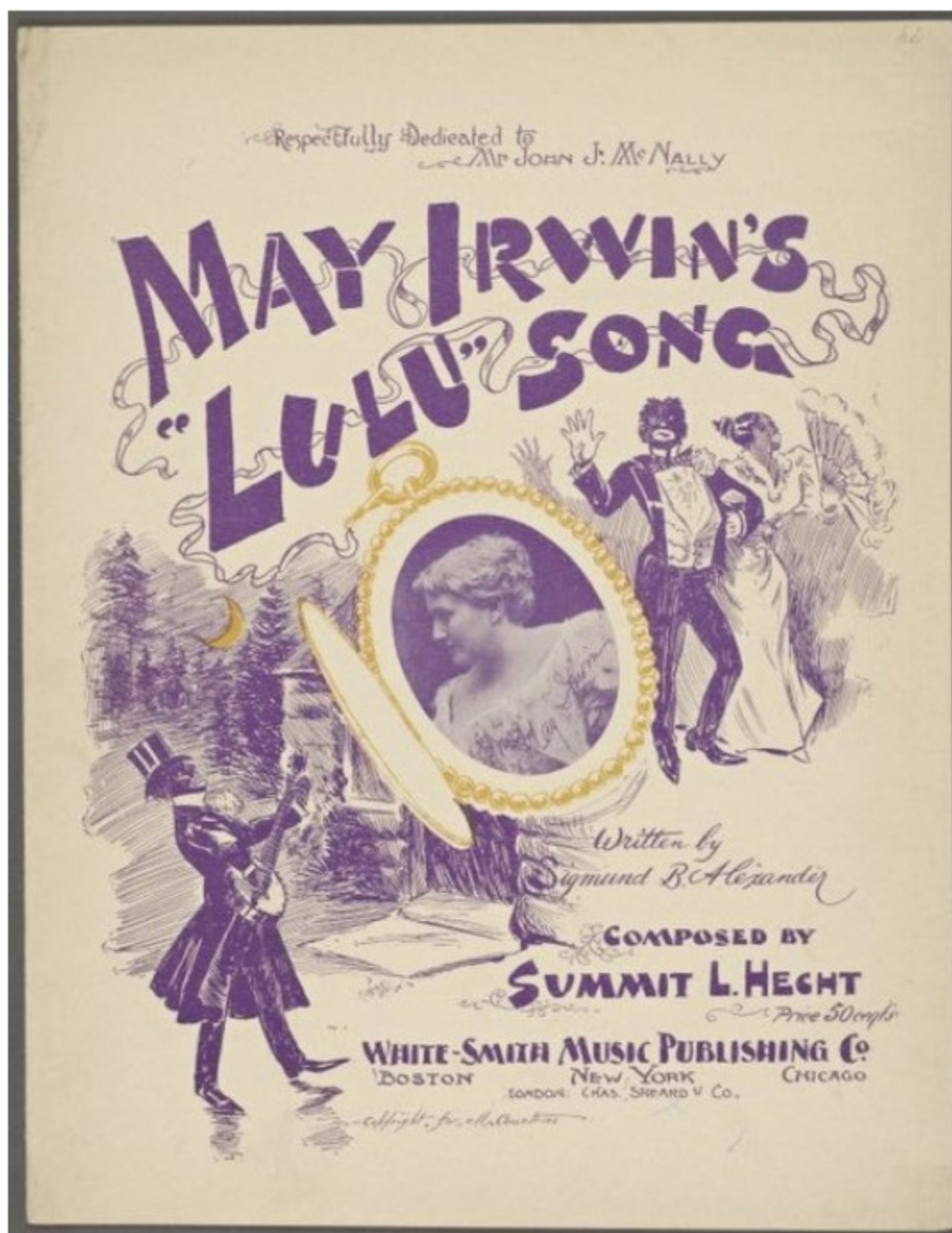


Figure 10. Advertisement of May Irwin's "Lulu Song."  
(1896. Courtesy New York Public Library.)

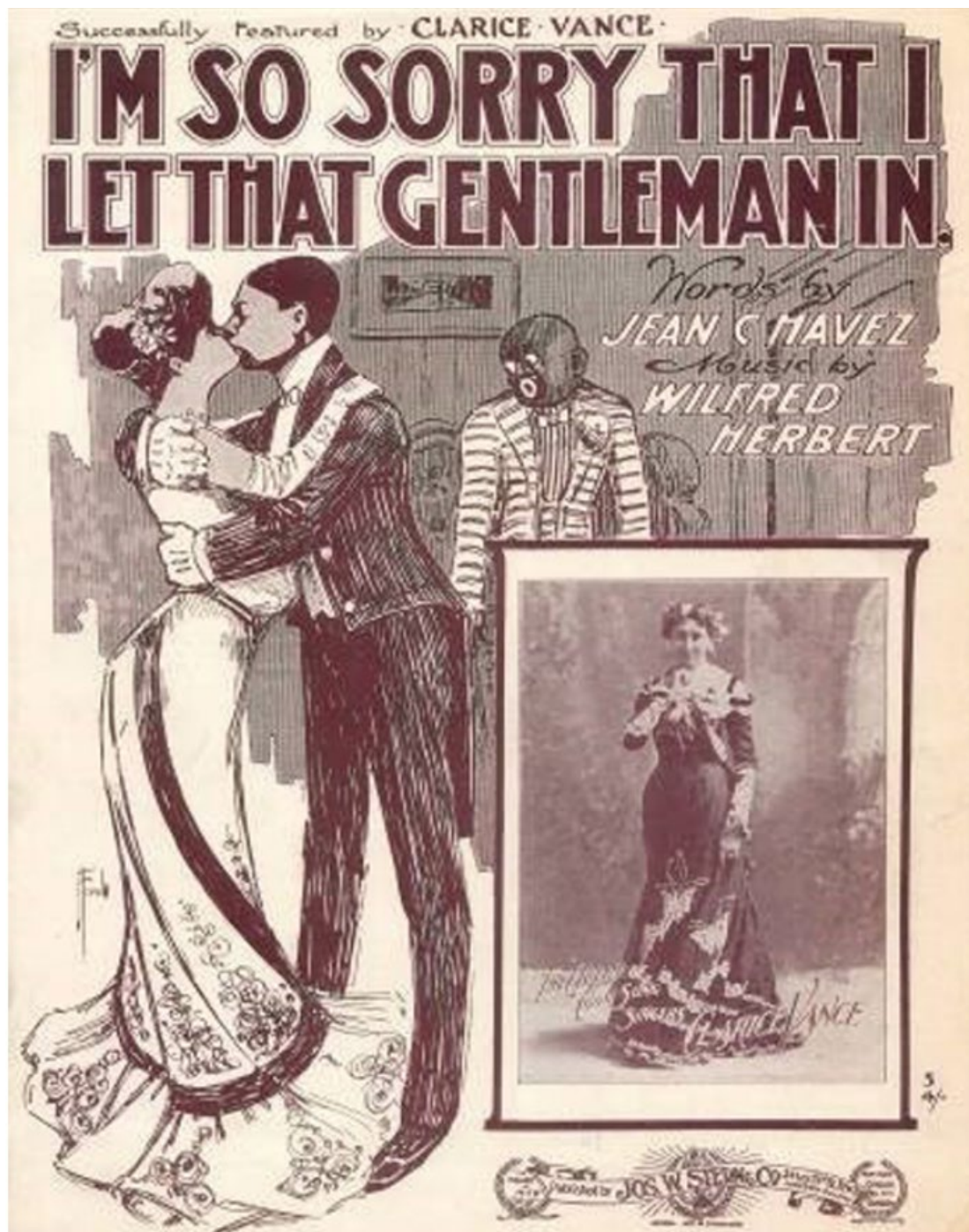


Figure 11. Advertisement of Clarice Vance's "I'm so Sorry That I Let That Gentleman in."  
 (1901. Excerpted from the booklet of Archeophone's CD "The High Priestess of Jollity & The Southern Singer" released in 2011.)



Figure 12. Sheet Music Cover of "Crazy Blues."  
(Courtesy Robert Langmuir African American Photograph Collection at Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.)



**Everybody Loves Music**  
**Player Rolls    Records**  
 Of All Kinds and Popular Sheet  
 Music. Send for Our  
**PRICE LIST**  
 Out of town orders given prompt  
 attention. Always add 10c for  
 postage. Nothing sent C. O. D.  
 Full Line of String and Brass  
 Instruments  
**OKEH RECORDS**  
**BY MAMIE SMITH**  
 No. 4169, "Crazy Blues" and  
 "That Thing Called Love"  
 No. 4113  
 Now ready for distribution.  
**VENDOME MUSIC SHOP**  
 Prof. E. Tate, Prop.  
 (Director Vendome Orchestra)  
 47 E. 31st Street    Chicago, Ill.

Figure 13. The First Advertisement of "Crazy Blues" in the Chicago Defender.  
(Chicago Defender, Nov 20, 1920. P. 7.)

**MAMIE SMITH RECORDS**



MAMIE SMITH

No. {	That Thing Called Love
4113 {	You Can't Keep a Good Man Down
No. {	Crazy Blues
4169 {	It's Right Here for You
No. {	Fair the Honey Blues
4194 {	The Road is Rocky

We ship two or more records, nothing less. \$1.00  
 each and 25c for postage. Nothing C. O. D. Mail  
 orders get prompt attention. All on rolls except  
 No. 4194    Price \$1.25

**PROF. E. TATE, Prop.**    **VENDOME MUSIC SHOP**    47 E. 31st St.  
 Director Vendome Orch.    Chicago, Ill.

Figure 14. Display ad of Mamie Smith's records in Jan 1921.  
(Chicago Defender. Jan 22, 1921, p.5)



**MAMIE SMITH  
RECORDS**

No. 4113 { That Thing Called Love  
You Can't Keep a Good Man  
Down

No. 4169 { Crazy Blues  
It's Right Here for You

No. 4194 { Fair the Honey Blues  
The Road is Rocky

No. 4226 { Mem'ries of You, Mammy  
If You Don't Want Me Blues

We ship two or more records, nothing less. \$1.00 each and 25c for postage. Nothing C. O. D. Mail orders get prompt attention. All on rolls except Nos. 4194 and 4226. Price \$1.25.

**PROF. E. TATE, Prop.**  
Director Vendome Orchestra

**VENDOME MUSIC SHOP**  
47 E. 31ST ST., CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Mamie Smith

Figure 15. Display Ad of Mamie Smith's Records in Feb 1921.  
(*Chicago Defender*. Feb 12, 1921, p.5)



Figure 16. Headshot Portrait of Mamie Smith.  
(*The New York Age*, Nov 13, 1920, p. 6. Newspapers.com.)



When You Buy a **BLACK SWAN RECORD**



you buy the  
**Only Records  
Made by  
Colored People**

Patronize Race enter-  
prises when you get  
the same value for  
for your money.



**Black Swan Records**  
Are Better Than Most Other Kinds

Buy from your dealer or order  
direct from

Ethel Waters, Queen of Blues Singers  
Race Phonograph Corp., 2289 Seventh Ave., New York City

Figure 17. Ethel Waters in Black Swan Advertisement.  
(*Chicago Defender*. Jan 07, 1922, p.7)



# Hear Alberta Hunter

(The Idol of Dreamland)



MISS ALBERTA HUNTER  
America's supreme blues singer. Miss Hunter is  
the most popular colored artist that ever  
appeared on the theatrical stage.

Sing "Don't Pan Me"  
and "Daddy Blues"

—the sensational blues songs with which she captivated Chicago's Dreamland for two seasons—now you can hear her sing her famous songs in your own home! Don't fail to hear her "Don't Pan Me" and "Daddy Blues"—now exclusively on Paramount Records (see list below).

Alberta Hunter is now singing for Paramount. Like other great artists of the Race, she has signed a contract to render her best songs exclusively for Paramount.

## Paramount Records

—all the best music when it's new. Every record gives you two big "hits"—some real music on each side—no "dead ones" in the whole Paramount catalog. Play them on any phonograph. Every record guaranteed. If there isn't a Paramount dealer near you, write for catalog—or order direct from the records listed below.

Send for these Sensational Blues Records—September Release  
Only 75 cents, or buy 4 and get one FREE

### Dealers, Agents, Representatives—

MAKE "BIG MONEY" EASY

We have a very profitable proposition for live wire dealers and agents. A few choice territories still open. Our agents make big money. Write or wire for complete details—now.



- |           |  |  |
|-----------|--|--|
| No. 13001 | { DON'T PAN ME—<br>DADDY BLUES—  | Alberta Hunter<br>Alberta Hunter   |
| No. 20151 | { SEND BACK "Y HONEY MAN—<br>I'VE GOT TO COOL MY PUPPIES NOW—  | Lucille Hegamin<br>Lucille Hegamin   |
| No. 12003 | { HARD TIME BLUES—<br>JOHN HENRY BLUES—  | Fox Trot—<br>Harlem Harmony Kings<br>Fox Trot—<br>Harlem Harmony Kings   |
| No. 12002 | { BANDANNA DAYS—<br>IF YOU'VE NEVER BEEN VAMPED BY<br>A BROWN SKIN YOU'VE NEVER<br>BEEN VAMPED AT ALL— | Tenor with Piano Accompaniment—<br>Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake<br>Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake<br>(Hits of "Shuffle Along") |
| No. 20145 | { HOT LIPS—<br>YOU CAN HAVE HIM, I DON'T WANT<br>HIM—  | Fox Trot—<br>Specht's Society Entertainers<br>Fox Trot—<br>Specht's Society Entertainers                                     |

Send currency or Post Office Money Order. Records sent to you Postpaid, 15 cents each; all five for \$3.00.

The New York Recording Laboratories, Inc.  
Port Washington, Wisconsin

Figure 19. Alberta Hunter in Paramount Advertisement 1922.  
(Chicago Defender. Aug 19, 1922. p6)

# Maybe Some Day



**ALBERTA HUNTER** scores another big hit—she has a habit of doing that little thing. That's why she sings exclusively for Paramount Records. This time it's "Maybe Some Day"—a song you'll all be humming as soon as you hear it. *It's got the stuff!!* There's a nifty piano and cornet accompaniment with it. Get Paramount Record No. 12066—on the reverse side is "Miss Anna Brown", also by Alberta.

**Only PARAMOUNT Can Offer You an All-Star List Like This:**

- 12066—Maybe Some Day and Miss Anna Brown, sung by Alberta Hunter, piano and cornet acc.
- 12064—Lawdy, Lawdy Blues and Moanin', Groanin' Blues, sung by Ida Cox—the Blues Singer with a feeling. Acc. by Blues Serenaders with Tom Ladiner and his praying cornet.
- 12069—Kansas City Man Blues and Uncle Sam Blues, sung by Edna Hicks, piano acc.
- 12063—I've Got the Blues for Rampart Street and Chattanooga Blues, sung by Ida Cox.
- 12056—Chicago Bound (Famous Migration Blues) and I Love My Man Better Than Myself. Ida Cox, piano acc. by Lovie Austin.
- 12022—New Graveyard Dream Blues and Come Right In, Ida Cox.
- 12032—Raise R-U-K-U-S Tonight and Ain't It a Shame, Norfolk Jazz Quartette.
- 12065—Experience Blues and Sad 'n Lonesome Blues, Alberta Hunter.
- 12035—Father Prepare Me and My Lord's Gonna Move this Wicked Race, Norfolk Jubilee Quart.
- 12073—When All the Saints Come Marching In and That Old-Time Religion, Elkins-Payne and Paramount Jubilee Singers.

Write for **FREE** catalog of all Paramount Records.

**THE NEW YORK RECORDING LABORATORIES**  
12 Paramount Bldg. Port Washington, Wis.

**Send No Money!**  
Take the above list to your dealer. If he can't supply you with genuine Paramount Records, order direct from factory. Records sent to you C.O.D., 75 cents each. *We pay postage and insurance.*

**Want More Money?**  
It's easy to sell Paramount Records to your friends and neighbors. Hundreds of men and women make money this way. It's easy and pleasant—full or part time. Thousands of openings where we have no dealers. Write for agent's proposition—now.

REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.

# Paramount

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

## The Popular Race Record

Figure 20. Alberta Hunter in Paramount Advertisement 1924.  
(Chicago Defender. Jan 12, 1924. P3)

*Chicago Defender*  
(May 26, 1923) p.2, col.2

**Folks—Say “Howdy”  
to Bessie Smith**

**BESSIE SMITH** is a bright new star in the firmament of colored vocal artists.

Her rich melodious voice has a wonderful crooning quality, and my! how beautifully it records. For a real blues treat go to the nearest Columbia shop and ask to hear Bessie sing “*Gulf Coast Blues*.” It will sure get you.

CLARENCE WILLIAMS, the composer, plays the piano accompaniment.

On the other side Bessie sings “*Down Hearted Blues*” which is equally contagious.

Photo. Eicha

*The finest talent among colored artists records for the Columbia Graphophone Company*

At Columbia Dealers  
A-3844 75c

**Columbia**  
New Process **Records**

COLUMBIA GRAPHOPHONE COMPANY, New York

Figure 21. Bessie Smith in Columbia Advertisement 1923.  
(*Chicago Defender*. May 26, 1923. P2)





Photo by Patton Studio  
Indianapolis, Ind.

**BESSIE SMITH**  
**"The Empress of Blues Singers"**  
**EXCLUSIVE COLUMBIA STAR**

Figure 22. Bessie Smith as The Empress of Blues Singers.  
(*Chicago Defender*. Nov 22, 1924. P5)

# Bessie Smith



*and the*

## DIXIE FLYER BLUES

*Columbia Record 14079-D*

Come on, old loud needle!

Chu-chu—bam-bam—toot-toot! Mister  
Clarinet and Mister Trombone never did  
sound more like real. Get aboard! Let's go!  
That's Bessie Smith singing "Dixie Flyer  
Blues." Just like going back South ag'in.  
Hear that girl sing. Then try "You've  
Been a Good Ole Wagon" on the other  
side. Some record!

COLUMBIA PHONOGRAPH COMPANY  
1619 Broadway, New York

# Columbia

PHONOGRAPHS RECORD

Figure 23. Bessie Smith in Columbia Advertisement 1925.  
(*Chicago Defender*. Jul 25, 1925. P2)

# What's the matter Now?

*Sung by*  
**Bessie Smith**

*Here's  
A  
New*



**Columbia New Process Record**

No. 14129D [ What's the Matter Now? ]  
10 in, 75c [ I Want Ev'ry Bit of It ]

**T**WO songs by Bessie Smith—The "Empress of Blues Singers," herself. That's Bessie's specialty—Blues—if there's any Blues number she can't sing, we've never heard of it, and this is one of her best Blues Records.

The finest race talent makes records exclusively for Columbia. You are always sure to find just the music you want as you want it, at the Columbia Dealer's store.

COLUMBIA PHONOGRAPH COMPANY  
1819 Broadway New York

# Columbia

Figure 24. Bessie Smith in Columbia Advertisement 1926.  
(*Chicago Defender*. May 8, 1926. P8)





## “Thinking Blues”

This time Bessie thinks out loud — and, boy, what she thinks is nobody's business. We don't mean maybe. Neither will you, when you hear it. Ask your Columbia dealer to play this very latest Bessie Smith

number for you. He has played it a great many times already, but he'll enjoy hearing it again. Everybody does. “I Used To Be Your Sweet Mamma,” on the other side of the record, is a Knock-out, and how!

Record No. 14292-D 10-inch 75c  
Thinking Blues  
I Used To Be Your Sweet Mamma — Vocals } BESSIE SMITH

### Other Popular Records

Record No. 14276-D 10-inch 75c  
I Know His Blood Can Make Me Whole  
Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed — Vocals  
BLIND WILLIE JOHNSON

Record No. 14275-D 10-inch 75c  
Doggin' Me Blues . . . . . Brown Skin  
Blues . . . . . Vocals  
LILLIAN GLINN

Record No. 14280-D 10-inch 75c  
Fo Day Creep. . . . . Crooked Woman  
Blues . . . . . Vocals  
BARBECUE BOB

Record No. 14277-D 10-inch 75c  
Take Your Burden To The Lord and Leave  
It There . Lift Him Up That's All . Vocals  
WASHINGTON PHILLIPS

### Records of Special Interest

**TED LEWIS and His Band**  
The Sweetheart of Sigma Chi . . .  
Good Night . . . . . Waltzes  
(Incidental Singing by Ted Lewis)  
Record No. 1296-D 10-inch 75c

**UKULELE IKE**  
(Cliff Edwards)  
Mary Ann . . . Together . . . Vocals  
Record No. 1295-D 10-inch 75c

**LEE MORSE**  
and Her Blue Grass Boys  
There Must Be a Silver Lining . . .  
Let a Smile Be Your Umbrella  
on a Rainy Day . . . . . Vocals  
Record No. 1303-D 10-inch 75c

Ask Your Dealer for Latest Race Record Catalog

Columbia Phonograph Company, 1819 Broadway, New York City



**Columbia** NEW PROCESS **Records**  
Made the New Way - Electrically  
Vita-tonal Recording - The Records without Scratch



Figure 25. Bessie Smith in Columbia Advertisement 1928.  
(Chicago Defender. May 24, 1928. P6)



Figure 26. Bessie Smith in Columbia Advertisement 1928.  
(*Chicago Defender*, Oct 20, 1928. P6)



Figure 27. Bessie Smith in Columbia Advertisement 1929.  
(*Chicago Defender*, Jul 20, 1929. P5)



Photo by  
Elena, N. Y.

**CLARA SMITH—Exclusive Columbia Star**

Figure 28. Clara Smith in Columbia Advertisement.  
(*Chicago Defender*. Oct 18, 1924. P5)

# Greatest Value for \$1.85 Ever Offered Okeh Dealers!

These displays are the equal of any in art treatment, color, idea, manufacture and sales value, but—at a price that is cheaper than any similar service on the market. They combine the suggestions of dealers, jobbers, salesmen and phonograph men from all parts of the country.



## Good Reasons Why You Can Use This Service

Each display contains six cards 11x14 inches in size and one card 14x22 inches. These seven cards will not overcrowd your window, and yet they are sufficient in number to make any window strikingly attractive.

Each display will illustrate the titles of the records in a humorous cartoon style. Titles are always different, and so the displays must be.

## Displays Fit In Any Window

Because of the limited number of units and their size, these displays will fit any dealer's window. If your window is large spread them out. If it is small use them compactly.

## One Record To A Card

Each card will feature only one record. This means that the lettering will be readable across the street! You can always re-use the card.

Only the best records of the month will be featured. This means advertising the records you are sure to carry in stock. No "dead wood" in the display!

The phenomenally low price is possible because we will share the cost of this service. We are asking you to pay only a small amount in return for the benefit it brings you directly.

## Business Will Be Better

If you will use this service, it will stop idle and sell records if you give it half a chance. We realize that dealers handle various lines and quite naturally wish to push these lines as well in their windows. We urge this, for variety in window display is absolutely essential. All the more reason, then, for using the Okeh Displays.

## Act Quickly!

Orders are coming in fast for this new Okeh Display Service. Our dealers say it is the biggest thing ever offered them. It pulls customers into the store. Don't delay your order. Fill out the blank in the corner

TO-DAY!

## General Phonograph Corp.

OTTO HEINEMAN, President  
25 West 45th Street  
NEW YORK, N. Y.



TEAR OFF ON DOTTED LINE AND MAIL THIS ORDER

## Be Sure to Fill In Distributor's Name!

GENERAL PHONOGRAPH CORPORATION  
DEALER SERVICE DEPARTMENT  
25 WEST 45th STREET, NEW YORK CITY

Give us your order for the new Okeh Display Service at \$1.85 per unit, including shipping and handling charges.

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 29. Okeh's Roster of Comic Window Display Cards including that of Mamie Smith's "Wang Wang Blues."  
(*The Talk Machine World*. New York. January 15, 1922. Quoted in Foreman, "Jazz and Race Records," P218)

# "DOO-DAH BLUES"

A New **OKeh** Hit

by

## MAMIE SMITH

WHEN you think of BLUES you think of Mamie Smith. When you hear a Mamie Smith record you hear it only on OKeh. Add Doo-Dah Blues, the new hit, to your list of Mamie Smith records.

### TRY ANY ONE OF THESE 4 BEST SELLERS

4578 10 in. 75c	<b>DOO-DAH BLUES</b> —Popular Blues Vocal— <i>Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds</i> <b>WABASH BLUES</b> —Popular Blues Vocal— <i>Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds</i>	8025 10 in. 75c	<b>STINGAREE BLUES</b> —Contralto with Orchestra— <i>Eather Bigeon</i> <b>IF THAT'S WHAT YOU WANT HERE IT IS</b> —Contralto with Orchestra— <i>Eather Bigeon</i>
8032 10 in. 75c	<b>STATE STREET BLUES</b> —Contralto With Orchestra— <i>Lizzie Miles</i> <b>VIRGINIA BLUES</b> —Contralto with Orchestra— <i>Lizzie Miles</i>	8031 10 in. 75c	<b>MUSCLE SHOALS BLUES</b> —Contralto with Orchestra— <i>Lizzie Miles</i> <b>SHE WALKED RIGHT UP AND TOOK MY MAN AWAY</b> —Contralto with Orchestra— <i>Lizzie Miles</i>

*There are 68 OKeh Records by Race Artists in the latest OKeh list. Have you heard them all? Ask your dealer for it.*

GENERAL PHONOGRAPH CORPORATION, 25 WEST 45th STREET, NEW YORK CITY

Figure 30. OKeh Advertisement of Mamie Smith's "Doo-Dah Blues."  
*(Chicago Defender. May 20, 1922. P6)*

### **Camptown Races**

Camptown ladies sing dis song, Doo-dah! doo-dah!  
Camptown race-track five miles long, Oh, doo-dah day!  
I come down dah wid my hat caved in, Doo-dah! doo-dah!  
I go back home wid a pocketful of tin, Oh, doo-dah day!

Gwine to run all night!  
Gwine to run all day!  
I'll bet my money on de bob-tail nag,  
Somebody bet on de bay.

--The first stanza of "Camptown Races" composed by Stephen Foster.

### **Doo-Dah Blues**

What will become of me, what will become of me,  
Something it's plain to see, is wrong with me, is wrong with me,  
I am always sighing, I am always crying  
San am I Here's the reason why.

Just only yesterday, my sweetie went away,  
I thought 'twas all in play, but when I heard her say  
"Doo Dah, goodbye to you Doo Dah, that means that I'm through."

Ph lordy oh! Those Doo Dah Blues,  
I want to lose those Doo Dah Blues.  
For all night long, till early dawn,  
They seem to come and never leave me.

--The first Part of "Doo-Dah Blues" composed by Fred Rose and Eddie White.

Figure 31. Lyrics of "Camptown Races" and "Doo-Dah Blues"



## "LONESOME MAMMA BLUES"

A close rival to "MUSCLE SHOALS BLUES"  
the tremendous Okeh hit

**Y**OU'LL almost get up and shout when you  
hear that talking, wailing, moaning saxo-  
phone.

Oh boy! "The Lonesome Mamma Blues"  
fox trot is the best toe-tickler since "Muscle  
Shoals Blues."

### Try Any One Of These 6 BEST SELLERS

4580 10 in. 75c	LONESOME MAMMA BLUES—Fox Trot— <i>Markels' Orchestra</i> *	4578 10 in. 75c	WABASH BLUES—Popular Blues Vocal— <i>Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds</i> *
	GEORGIA—Fox Trot— <i>Rega Dance Orchestra</i> *		DOO-DAH BLUES—Popular Blues Vocal— <i>Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds</i> *
4477 10 in. 75c	MUSCLE SHOALS BLUES—Fox Trot — <i>Harry Raderman's Jazz Orchestra</i>	4318 10 in. 75c	JELLY ROLL BLUES—Colored Male Quartet— <i>The Norfolk Jazz Quartet</i> *
	I'VE GOT MY HABITS ON—Fox Trot — <i>Joseph Samuels' Jazz Band</i>		SOUTHERN JACK—Colored Male Quartet— <i>The Norfolk Jazz Quartet</i> *
4194 10 in. 75c	THE ROAD IS ROCKY (But I Am Gonna Find My Way)—Popular Blues Vocal— <i>Mamie Smith and her Jazz Hounds</i> *	8025 10 in. 75c	STINGAREE BLUES—Contralto with Orchestra— <i>Esther Bigeou</i>
	FARE THEE HONEY BLUES—Popular Blues Vocal— <i>Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds</i> *		IF THAT'S WHAT YOU WANT, HERE IT IS—Contralto with Orchestra— <i>Esther Bigeou</i>

\*Can be heard only on Okeh Records

The latest Okeh List contains 68 Records by Race Artists.  
Ask your dealer for this new list.

GENERAL PHONOGRAPH CORPORATION, 25 WEST 45th STREET, NEW YORK

**Okeh** The Record  
of Quality

Figure 32. Okeh Advertisement of "Lonesome Mama Blues."  
(*Chicago Defender*. Jun 03, 1922. P6)



# MAMIE SMITH

scores TWO NEW HITS in

*"Lonesome Mama Blues"*  
and *"Dem Knock-Out Blues"*

**M**AMIE SMITH, queen of race artists, has added two new triumphs to her famous Okeh list. You may be a Mamie Smith fan already, but wait until you hear these two wonderful records!

*Try Any One Of These*

## SIX BEST SELLERS

- 4630 { LONESOME MAMA BLUES—Popular Colored Singer—  
10 in. Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds ★  
75c NEW ORLEANS—Popular Colored Singer—  
Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds ★
- 4631 { DEM KNOCK-OUT BLUES—Popular Colored Singer—  
10 in. Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds ★  
75c MEAN DADDY BLUES—Popular Colored Singer—  
Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds ★
- 8025 { STINGAREE BLUES—Contralto with Orchestra—  
10 in. Esther Bigsby  
75c IF THAT'S WHAT YOU WANT, HERE IT IS—Contralto  
with Orchestra—Esther Bigsby
- 8031 { MUSCLE SHOALS BLUES—Contralto with Orchestra—  
10 in. Lizzie Miles  
75c SHE WALKED RIGHT UP AND TOOK MY MAN AWAY—  
Contralto with Orchestra—Lizzie Miles
- 8032 { STATE STREET BLUES—Contralto with Orchestra—  
10 in. Lizzie Miles  
75c VIRGINIA BLUES—Contralto with Orchestra—Lizzie Miles
- 4318 { JELLY ROLL BLUES—Colored Male Quartette—  
10 in. The Norfolk Jazz Quartette ★  
75c SOUTHERN JACK—Colored Male Quartette—  
The Norfolk Jazz Quartette ★

★Exclusive Okeh Artists

Ask your neighborhood dealer for a complete  
list of Okeh Records by famous race artists.

GENERAL PHONOGRAPH CORPORATION  
25 West 45th Street New York

**Okeh Records**  
*The Records of Quality*

Figure 33. Advertisement of Okeh 4630 "Lonesome Mama Blues."  
(Chicago Defender. Jul 08, 1922. P6)



**SING 'EM EDITH!**  
WHILE THE  
**Original Jazz Hounds Play 'Em**

**Nervous Blues and Vampin' Liza Jane**  
COLUMBIA RECORD No. A-3479

**Frankie Blues and Old Time Blues**  
COLUMBIA RECORD No. A-3505

SUNG BY  
**Edith Wilson** COLUMBIA RECORD STAR

PUBLISHED BY  
**PERRY BRADFORD (Inc.)**  
1547 BROADWAY NEW YORK, N. Y.



Chicago Defender. Jan 21, 1922. P7.

Send All Orders and Inquiries for Okeh Records to  
**ST. LOUIS MUSIC CO.**  
(Mail Order Exclusively)  
SEND NO MONEY BOX 566, ST. LOUIS, MO.

Hear  
**MAMIE SMITH'S**  
latest  
bluest of blues, "SWEET COOKIE"  
and on the other side hear Mamie again in  
"OH, JOE (PLEASE DON'T GO)"—on  
**Okeh Records**  
The Record of Quality



Chicago Defender. Mar 25, 1922. P6.

**"STATE ST. BLUES"**  
Sung by **LIZZIE MILES**  
ON  
**Okeh Records**  
THE RECORDS OF QUALITY



**STATE STREET, Chicago—center of the blues: "State Street Blues"—newest, bluest Okeh Record that everyone will soon be humming from State Street to Jacksonville.**

TRY ANY ONE OF THESE 4 BEST SELLERS

5822 10 in. 75c	STATE STREET BLUES—Contralto With Orchestra—Lizzie Miles	5831 10 in. 75c	MUSCLE SHOALS BLUES—Contralto With Orchestra—Lizzie Miles
	VIRGINIA BLUES—Contralto with Orchestra—Lizzie Miles		SHE WALKED RIGHT UP AND TOOK MY MAN AWAY—Contralto With Orchestra—Lizzie Miles
4580 10 in. 75c	GEORGIA—Fox Trot—Rege Dance Orchestra	5825 10 in. 75c	STINGAREE BLUES—Contralto With Orchestra—Esther Bigeou
	LONESOME MAMMA BLUES—Fox Trot—Markels' Orchestra		IF THAT'S WHAT YOU WANT, HERE IT IS—Contralto With Orchestra—Esther Bigeou

\*Can be heard only on Okeh Records

Ask your dealer for the latest Okeh list of 68 Records by Race Artists

GENERAL PHONOGRAPH CORPORATION, 25 WEST 45th STREET, NEW YORK CITY

Chicago Defender. Jun 27, 1922. P7.



**MAMIE SMITH**  
and Her Jazz Hounds have a new one—the **"DA-DA STRAIN"**  
—good for a mile of chuckles—those ever-lovin' chuckles, that make Okeh Race Artists famous in every corner of the U. S. A.

Chicago Defender. Nov 18, 1922. P7.



**"OH MAMIE!"**  
**"I've Got the Mamie Smith Blues"**

**IT'S HERE!** Mamie's own true blues hit. Just cast your eyes on the famous words of the song and then go get it on the Okeh Record No. 4658—quick while your dealer still has it in stock.

Words and Music by Mamie Smith & Milo Rega  
**"Oh Mamie! 'I've Got the Mamie Smith Blues'"**

Chicago Defender. Sep 23, 1922. P7.

Figure. 34-38. Chicago Defender Advertisements of Okeh's Vaudeville Blueswomen



# Here They Are!

## The World's Most Famous Blues Singers—Singing the Latest Hits Exclusively for Paramount



**"Ma" Rainey**  
Famous old-time "Mother of the Blues." If it's Blues you want, she sure sings 'em.



**Alberta Hunter**  
There's real, sentimental yearning in all of pretty little Alberta's songs. Everybody loves her.



**Edmonia Henderson**  
The melodious Blues Singer who recently won the Paramount Blues Singer Contest. Edmonia is an old-time performer—a stage favorite.



**Ida Cox**  
The Unconquered Queen of the Blues. Known and loved everywhere as the "Blues Singer with a Feeling."



**Edna Hicks**  
You'll like her stuff. She can get more out of a Blues hit than an ordinary girl. She's got the pep!



**Norfolk Jazz Quartette**  
These noted harmonizers from the Sunny South. These four singing boys must have been born singing, you'll say.

**NO** wonder Paramount is the most popular Race Record! Here is a galaxy of stars known and loved everywhere—from State Street to Rampart Street and from there to old "Noo" York! No other records can offer you the wonderful Blues these singers are famous for. "Ma" Rainey and Ida Cox are often imitated—but only the best are ever imitated. There's only one Ida, one "Ma" Rainey, one Alberta—and they sing **ONLY** for Paramount.

### Hear these Wonderful Blues

**"Ma" Rainey**  
12080—So Weevil Blues and Last Minute Blues, acc. by Lovie Austin and her Blues Serenaders.  
12083—Moonshine Blues and Southern Blues, acc. by Lovie Austin and her Blues Serenaders.

**Alberta Hunter**  
12093—Old-Fashioned Love, and If the Rest of the World Don't Want You (Come Back to Mother and Dad), Alberta Hunter and Elkins-Payne Jubilee Quartette.  
12066—Miss Anna Brown and May-be Some Day, with Lovie Austin at the piano.

**Edmonia Henderson**  
12084—Black Men Blues and Worried 'Bout Him Blues, acc. by Lovie Austin and her Blues Serenaders.

**Ida Cox**  
12086—So Soon This Morning Blues and Confidential Blues.  
12085—Mama Doo Shee Blues and Worried Mama Blues, acc. by Lovie Austin and her Blues Serenaders.  
12064—Laudy, Laudy Blues and Moanin', Groanin' Blues.

**Edna Hicks**  
12090—Where Can That Somebody Be and If You Don't Give Me What I Want (I'm Gonna Get It Somewhere Else) Acc. by Fletcher Henderson's Trio.  
12089—Cemetery Blues and Poor Me, acc. by Porter Grainger's Savin' Three.

**Norfolk Jazz Quartette**  
12032—Ain't It a Shame and Raise R-u-k-u-s Tonight.  
12054—Stop Dat Band and Sed Blues.

### Inspiring Sacred Songs

12035—My Lord's Gonna Move This Wicked Race and Father, Prepare Me, Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.  
12073—When All the Saints Come Marching In and That Old-Time Religion, Paramount Jubilee Singers.  
12092—His Eye is on the Sparrow and Stand by Me. Sung by Madame Lawrence. Piano acc.

**Send No Money!** TAKE THE ABOVE LIST TO YOUR DEALER. If he can't supply genuine Paramount Records, order direct from factory. Records sent to you C. O. D., 75 cents each. We pay postage and insurance. (Agents wanted where we have no dealers.)

THE NEW YORK RECORDING LABORATORIES  
12 PARAMOUNT BLDG. PORT WASHINGTON, WIS.

# Paramount

The Popular Race Record

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Figure 41. Roster of Paramount's Blues Singers.  
(Chicago Defender. Mar 8, 1924. P4)





# Trixie Smith

Hear her beg the  
brakeman "Let Me  
Ride the Blind"

## Freight Train Blues



WITH her eyes full of tears, Trixie Smith sobs—"I hate to hear that engine blow O-O-oo-oo. She can't ride on the freight train—mean, cruel brakeman won't even let her ride the blind. So the whistle blows—the train goes—and Trixie goes to her room and hides. But when a man gets the Blues, he gets on a freight train and rides. On the other side, is Trixie Smith's "Don't Shake It No More". Accompaniments of both are exceptional—they're by Trixie's own Down Home Syncopators. Be sure and get this newest Paramount Record—No. 12211.

### Trixie Smith

—the former Black Swan star, is making some great records for Paramount. Ever since she won the National Blues Contest, Trixie has been one of the top-notchers. You'll find her new "Freight Train Blues" is as good as her famous "Trixie Blues".

## BLUES—Nothin' Else But—BLUES

12211—Freight Train Blues and Don't Shake It No More, Trixie Smith, acc. by Down Home Syncopators.

12209—The Gouge of Armour Avenue and The Chicago Gouge, Faye Barnes.

12098—Dream Blues and Lost Wandering Blues, Madams "Ma" Rainey's new Souvenir Record, with Ma's picture on the label. Sensational—different!

12202—Chicago Monkey Man Blues and Worried Anyhow Blues, Ida Cox. Hear Ida sing about all her monkey men—if they were money, she'd be a Chicago millionaire.

12082—Barrel House Blues and Walking Blues, "Ma" Rainey, acc. by Lovie Austin and Her Blues Serenaders.

12201—Red River Blues and Honey Blues, Lottie Beaman.

12213—Cool Kind Daddy Blues and Georgia Sam Blues, Anna Lee Chisholm.

12203—Hateful Blues and Mama Don't Want Sweet Man Any More, Edmonia Henderson.

12332—Mr. Jelly Lord and Steady Roll (The Karoo Record) instrumental by Jelly Roll Morton's Steamboat Four.

12205—You Ain't Foolin' Me and True Blues, Priscilla Stewart. Piano acc.

## Uplifting, Inspiring Sacred Songs

12035—My Lord's Gonna Move This Wicked Race and Father Prepare Me, Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.

12073—When All the Saints Come Marching In and That Old Time Religion, Paramount Jubilee Singers.

## Send No Money!

If your dealer can't supply you with any of the above Paramount Records, order direct from us, using the coupon at the right. Records shipped promptly, 75 cents each, plus 10-cent C. O. D. charge. Send no money. Pay the postman. We pay postage and insurance. Write for free, big Paramount-Black Swan "Book of the Blues."

Agents wanted where we have no dealers.

THE NEW YORK RECORDING LABORATORIES  
 12 PARAMOUNT BUILDING PORT WASHINGTON, WIS.

# Paramount

[Combined with Black Swan] REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.

## The Popular Race Record

### The New York Recording Laboratories

12 Paramount Bldg. Port Washington, Wis.

Send me the following records, C. O. D., 75 cents each, postage paid.

12211 ( )	12082 ( )	12201 ( )
12209 ( )	12210 ( )	12203 ( )
12098 ( )	12213 ( )	12205 ( )
12202 ( )	20332 ( )	12073 ( )
		12035 ( )

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 42. Advertisement of Trixie Smith's "Freight Train Blues."  
 (Chicago Defender. Jul 19, 1924. P6)



**T**HOSE achin' "Migration Blues"! How Ida Cox does moan 'em! "I'd follow my daddy, but my feet refuse to walk", so this left-behind Birmingham girl low-downs Chicago Bound Blues—the latest itching, twitching success by the Race's greatest Blues artist. Ask for No. 12056. On Paramount, the popular Race Record. The other side? "I Love My Man Better Than I Do Myself" by Ida Cox. Both accompanied by Lovie Austin, and she sure do romp on those ivories!

### Get These Ida Cox Hits and Other Popular Paramount Race Records

- 12056—Chicago Bound (Famous Migration Blues) and I Love My Man Better Than Myself—Sung by Ida Cox.—Piano acc. by Lovie Austin.
- 12053—Any Woman's Blues and Blue Monday Blues—Piano acc. by Lovie Austin—Ida Cox.
- 12044—Graveyard Dream Blues and Weary Way Blues—Ida Cox.
- 12045—Bama Bound Blues and Lovin' Is The Thing I'm Wild About—Sung by Ida Cox, piano acc. by Lovie Austin.
- 12054—Stop Dat Band and Sad Blues—Vocal Quartette—Norfolk Jazz Quartette.
- 12058—I'm Broke Fooling With You and I Ain't No Man's Slave—Vocal Blues with Piano acc.—Rosa Henderson.

- 12059—Play That Thing—Slow Drag—Ollie Power's Harmony Syncopators and Jazzbo Jenkins—Tenor with Orch.—Ollie Powers
- 12061—What a Time Talking With The Angels and Hard Trials—Horace George's Jubilee Harmonizers.
- 12043—Mistreated Blues and I'm Going Away—Alberta Hunter—Piano acc. by Fletcher Henderson.
- 12035—Father Prepare Me and My Lord's Gonna Move This Wicked Race—Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.
- 12050—Big Foot Ham and Muddy Water Blues—Jelly Roll Morton and His Orchestra.

#### SEND NO MONEY!

Clip this ad—take it to your dealer—If he can't supply genuine Paramount Records, order direct from factory. Records are mailed C.O.D. 75¢ each, postage prepaid. Write for free catalog of all Paramount Records.

#### IDA COX's NEW

Graveyard Dream Blues. Piano accompaniment by Lovie Austin with off new verse and a piano chorus. Ask for No. 12022—New Graveyard Dream Blues and Come Right In—by Ida Cox.

THE NEW YORK RECORDING LABORATORIES  
12 PARAMOUNT BLDG. PORT WASHINGTON, WIS.

# Paramount Records



Figure 43. Advertisement of Ida Cox's "Chicago Bound Blues."  
(Chicago Defender. Nov 17, 1923. P8)



## **"NUMBER TWELVE"**

You just know how a woman feels about leaving home when you hear, Number Twelve—Let Me Roam, sung by Victoria Spivey with Piano and Guitar accompaniments, latest Okeh Record. T-B Blues on the other side, by the same artist, is one of the best moan numbers of the season.

No. 8494—10 inch—75c

**No. 12—LET ME ROAM—Vocal**

**T-B BLUES—Vocal**

Both sung by **VICTORIA SPIVEY**  
with Piano and Guitar

© Okeh Phonograph Corporation, 25 West 45th Street, New York City

# **Okeh Race Records**

Figure 44. Advertisement of Victoria Spivey's "Number Twelve."  
(*Chicago Defender*. Sept 10, 1927. P3)



## “Back-Water Blues” Sung by Bessie Smith

YOU all know what the back-water is, and you know how dog-gone mournful a time it is when the old river starts sneakin' itself through the levee. But, folks, you don't know how mean and moanin' it really can be 'till you let your ears drink in “Back-Water Blues” as Bessie Smith mixes the

notes. They sure don't call Bessie “The Queen of Blues” for nothin'.

And, say, don't miss laying a needle against the other side of this record, 'cause that's somethin' pretty special, too. It's called “Preachin' the Blues,” and that's just right what it is.

People, here is the record you want.

“Back-Water Blues”	Vocal
“Preachin' the Blues”	Bessie Smith
Record No. 14185-D—10” Inch 75c.	

Columbia Phonograph Company, 1619 Broadway, New York City

**Columbia**  
NEW PROCESS RECORDS  
Made the New Way—Electrically  
Vita-tonal Recording—The Record without Scratch

Figure 45. Advertisement of Bessie Smith’s “Back-Water Blues.”  
(Chicago Defender. Apr 2, 1927. P8)



# Ida Cox Sings



The Uncrowned Queen of the Blues. This famous songstress—known by millions as the "Blues singer with a feeling"—sings exclusively for Paramount.

## "Mean Loving Man Blues"

YOU want to hear IDA COX cry for her mean, lovin' man in her latest Paramount Record "Mean Loving Man Blues". "My Man Drinks His Whiskey, and is as mean as can be—but when he starts loving, oh, he's so good to me!" A lonely girl's plea for her wayward man. Such an appealing, touching wail, you're bound to like it. There's an original, sparkling banjo and guitar accompaniment by Fruit Twins of Kansas City, that's different and catchy. On the other side, another Ida Cox song—just as good: "Down the Road Bound Blues".

### Newest and Best Race Hits on PARAMOUNT

#### "Ma" Rainey

12081—*Bad Luck Blues and Those All Night Long Blues.*

12080—*Bo Weevil Blues and Last Minute Blues.*

(Accompaniments by Lovie Austin and Blues Serenaders)

#### IDA COX

12094—*Mean Loving Man Blues and Down the Road Bound Blues, acc. by Fruit Twins, banjo and guitar.*

12086—*So Soon This Morning Blues and Confidential Blues, acc. by Lovie Austin and her Blues Serenaders.*

12064—*Laudy, Laudy Blues and Moanin', Groanin' Blues.*

#### Edna Hicks

12090—*Where Can That Somebody Be and If You Don't Give Me What I Want (I'm Gonna Get It Somewhere Else).*

12023—*Hard Luck Blues and I Don't Love Nobody, So I Ain't Got No Blues.*

12093—*Old-Fashioned Love and If the Rest of the World Don't Want You (Go Back to Mother and Dad)*—Alberta Hunter and Elkins-Payne Jubilee Quartette.

12084—*Black Mar. Blues and Worried 'Bout Him Blues*—Edmonia Henderson.

12032—*Raise R-U-K-U-S Tonight and Ain't It a Shame*, sung by Norfolk Jazz Quartette.

12035—*My Lord's Gonna Mose This Wicked Race and Father, Prepare Me*, sung by Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.

12073—*When All the Saints Come Marching In and That Old-Time Religion*, sung by Paramount Jubilee Singers.

12092—*His Eye is on the Sparrow and Stand by Me*, sung by Madame Magdalene Tartt Lawrence.

**Send No Money!** Take the above list to your dealer. If he can't supply genuine Paramount Records, order direct from factory. Records sent to you C. O. D., 75 cents each. We pay postage and insurance. (Agents wanted where we have no dealers).

**FREE!** Write for Paramount new "Book of the Blues". A valuable 48-page book—free!

THE NEW YORK RECORDING LABORATORIES  
12 PARAMOUNT BLDG.  
PORT WASHINGTON, WISCONSIN

**Paramount** The Popular Race Record  
Reg. U.S. Pat. Off.

Figure 46. Advertisement of Ida Cox's "Mean Loving Man Blues."  
(Chicago Defender. Apr 5, 1924. P12)



# "Fore Day Creep"



by  
**Ida Cox**

*"I'm gonna buy me a bull dog to watch  
my man while he sleeps,  
Men are so dog-gone crooked, I'm afraid  
he might make a 'fore day creep."*

**SHE** has the right idea. *She knows men.* All he can do is sleep, and he'd better sleep dog-gone sound. Ida Cox is at her best in this real, hot Blues, and another feature is the wonderful piano accompaniment by the well-known Jesse Crump. Get this record—Paramount No. 12488—at your dealer's, or send us the coupon.

**[ 12488—"Fore Day Creep and Gypsy Glass Blues, Ida Cox; piano acc. by Jesse Crump. ]**

**12486—Swamp Blues and Off To Buffalo,** Fletcher Henderson's Orchestra.

**12487—Rising High Water Blues and Teddy Bear Blues,** Blind Lemon Jefferson; Piano Acc. by Geo. Perkins.

**12479—Dry Bone Shuffle and One Time Blues,** Blind Blake, His Guitar and Rattle Bones.

**12497—That Black Snake Moan and Stocking Feet Blues,** Blind Lemon Jefferson.

**12397—Early Morning Blues and West Coast Blues,** Blind Blake and His Guitar.



**12475—Snatch It Back Blues and Number Three Blues,** Biddy Boy Hawkins.

**12417—Saw Mill Blues and Barrel House Man,** Elsie Robinson, Piano Accompaniment by Will Erell.

**Inspiring Spirituals**

**12484—Will My Mother Know Me There and The Royal Telephone,** Blind Connie Rosemond.

**12495—I'll Be Satisfied and It Pays To Serve Jesus,** Vocal Quartette—Pace Jubilee Singers (Hattie Parker, Soloist.)

**12366—All I Want Is That Pure Religion and I Want To Be Like Jesus In My Heart,** Deacon L. J. Bates.

**12477—Waiting At The Beautiful Gate and I Am So Glad Trouble Don't Last Always,** Rev. J. M. Gates and His Congregation.

**SEND NO MONEY!** If your dealer is out of the records you want, send us the coupon below. Pay postman 25 cents for each record, plus small C. O. D. fee when he delivers records. We pay postage on shipments of two or more records.

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Port Washington, Wis.  
Send me the records checked ( ) below, 75 cents each.

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( ) 12486	( ) 12387	( ) 12485
( ) 12487	( ) 12475	( ) 12385
( ) 12479	( ) 12417	( ) 12477

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_


Figure 47. Advertisement of Ida Cox's "Fore Day Blues."  
(Chicago Defender. Jun 18, 1927. P7)



# "Soon this Morning Blues"

by "Ma" Rainey

*"Soon this morning, just about  
the break of day,  
I caught my good man making  
his getaway."*



**SUN-RISE**, and her man is goin' away! No wonder she feels blue and sings the bluest of Blues—"Soon this Morning Blues". There's hard luck, remorse, unsatisfied love, and worlds of yearning in this great new hit by "Ma" Rainey, the world-famed "mother of the Blues". Don't fail to ask your dealer for Paramount Record No. 12438, or send us the coupon.

**[ 12438—Soon This Morning Blues, "Ma" Rainey and Her Georgia Boys, and Don't Fish in My Sea, "Ma" Rainey, acc. by James Blythe at the piano. ]**

**12439—Goin' Home Blues**, Cow Cow Davenport, Singing and Piano; and **Jim Crow Blues**, B. T. Wingfield, Cornet. 1

**12497—That Black Snake Moan and Stocking Foot Blues**, Blind Lemon Jefferson.

**12397—Early Morning Blues and West Coast Blues**, Blind Blake.

**12481—Cotton Field Blues and Red River Blues**, Dad Nelson and His Guitar.

**12419—Little Low Mome Blues and Goin' in' Heasted Blues**, Ma Rainey; Violin and Guitar Accompaniment.

**12495—War Time Blues and Reuger Reuger Blues**, Blind Lemon Jefferson.

**12417—Sawmill Blues and Barrel House Man**, Elsie Robinson; Piano Accompaniment by Will Erell.

**12416—Coon Can Blues and Mississippi Strut**, Dad Nelson and His Guitar.

### Beautiful Spirituals

**12437—God So Loved The World and Prayer**, Rev. W. A. White.

**12437—Dying Gambler and Praying For The Pastor**, Rev. J. M. Gates.

**12416—After A-While and Baptism Me**, Rev. J. M. Gates.

**12673—When All The Saints Come Marching In and That Old Time Religion**, Paramount Jubilee Singers.

**Send No Money!** If your dealer is out of the records you want, send us the coupon below. Pay postman 75 cents for each record, plus small C. O. D. fee when he delivers records. We pay postage on shipments of two or more records.

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The New York Record-Dep Laboratories

10 Paramount City, New York, N. Y.

Send me the records checked & below, 75 cents each.

<input type="checkbox"/> 12438	<input type="checkbox"/> 12495	<input type="checkbox"/> 12416
<input type="checkbox"/> 12439	<input type="checkbox"/> 12497	<input type="checkbox"/> 12417
<input type="checkbox"/> 12481	<input type="checkbox"/> 12419	<input type="checkbox"/> 12416
<input type="checkbox"/> 12497	<input type="checkbox"/> 12417	<input type="checkbox"/> 12673

Name

Address

Figure 48. Advertisement of Ma Rainey's "Soon This Morning Blues."  
(Chicago Defender, Feb 19, 1927. P7)

# "Jealous Hearted Blues"

Sung by **Ma Rainey**



"You can have my money, everything I own  
But please just leave my man alone,  
Cuz I'm jealous, jealous,  
I'm jealous as I can be."

IT takes "Ma" Rainey—the Mother of the Blues—to sing a hit like this. Hear her tell the shebas to leave her man alone—hear about what she's gonna do with a bull-dog if her man don't quit foolin' 'round. Be sure to get Paramount No. 12252. On the other side is another corker by "Ma"—"See See Rider Blues".

## You Can't Go Wrong With These

12246—Drunk Man's Strut and Red Hot Mama. Jimmie O'Bryant and his sensational Washboard Band. Hear the wicked, moaning clarinet and the washboard harmony!

12241—Barum's Steam Calliope and Didn't He Ramble, great novelty record by Sunset Four.

12098—Dream Blues and Lost Wandering Blues, "Ma" Rainey's great Souvenir Record. Her picture right on the record. No extra charge.

12252—Jealous Hearted Blues and See See Rider Blues. "Ma" Rainey and her Georgia Jazz Band.

12236—Salty Dog Blues and Salt Lake City Blues, "Papa" Charley Jackson.

12243—Down By the River Blues and Don't Dog Me 'Round, Soderita Miller.

12245—Choo Choo Blues and Ride Jockey Ride, Trixie Smith and Her Down Home Syncopators.

12242—Booze and Blues and Tood Poo Blues, "Ma" Rainey.

20364—Big Fat Mama Blues and Gin House Blues, Clarinet solos by Boyd Boston.

12247—West Indies Blues and Go Long Mule, by Ukulele "Bob" Williams.

12240—Delta Bottom Blues and I Never Call My Man's Name, Priscilla Stewart.

12228—Cherry-Picking Blues and Wild Women Don't Have No Blues, Ida Cox.

## Race's Favorite Spirituals

12035—Father Prepare Me and My Lord's Gonna Move this Wicked Race, Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.

12073—When All The Saints Come Marching In and That Old-Time Religion, Paramount Jubilee Singers.

12217—Ezekiel Saw De Wheel and Crying Holy Unto The Lord, Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.

12231—Where Shall I Be and I'm Gonna Build Right on Dat Shore, Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.

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11 PARAMOUNT BUILDING PORT WASHINGTON, WIS.

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[Including Black Swan]

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Recording  
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each, C. O. D., postage paid.

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12236	12238
12243	12240
12245	12247
12242	12241
20364	12231
12247	12236

Name.....  
Address.....  
City.....

Figure 49. Advertisement of Ma Rainey's "Jealous Hearted Blues."  
(Chicago Defender, Feb 14, 1925. P7)

# "Mr. Freddie Blues"



Sung by  
**Priscilla Stewart**

"I love my Freddie, but he just won't behave," sings pretty Priscilla Stewart in her newest, biggest Paramount record. Women go wild over the dashing Mr. Freddie—he's a cake-eater and a cake-walker. But just hear what his "Mrs." is going to do—bloodhounds, shot-guns, lonesome grave and everything! It's Paramount Record No. 12224; on the reverse side is "Mecca Flat Blues" by Priscilla Stewart.



"I love my Freddie, but he just won't behave," sings pretty Priscilla Stewart in her newest, biggest Paramount record. Women go wild over the dashing Mr. Freddie—he's a cake-eater and a cake-walker. But just hear what his "Mrs." is going to do—bloodhounds, shot-guns, lonesome grave and everything! It's Paramount Record No. 12224; on the reverse side is "Mecca Flat Blues" by Priscilla Stewart.



Let me tell you just what Mr. Freddie will do: Take your money and stay out all night from you.

## A New List of New Blues—Every One a Knock-Out!

- 12224—Mr. Freddie Blues and Mecca Flat Blues, Priscilla Stewart.
- 12227—South Bound Blues and Lawd, Send Me a Man, Sung by "Ma" Rainey.
- 12220—Death Letter Blues and Kentucky Man Blues, Ida Cox and Louis Armstrong's Blues Serenaders.

**Two Extra-Special Records**  
12231—Hot Springs Water Blues and Who'll Drive My Blues Away, Soderia Miller (a new Paramount Star with a wonderful golden voice).  
12209—You Ain't Foolin' Me and True Blues, Priscilla Stewart. Piano acc. by James Blythe. (You're sure to like this!)

- 12211—Freight Train Blues and Don't Shake It No More, Tricie Smith and Her Down-home Syncopators.
- 12226—I'm Leaving You and I'm Sorry For It Now, Vocal duet by Eddie Green and Billie Wilson.
- 12223—He's Never Gonna Throw Me Down and Keep On Going, Vocal duet by Kiny Brown and LeRoy Morton.
- 20341—Mobile Blues (Clarinet Solo) and St. Louis Blues, Chicago DeLuxe Orchestra—featuring Boyd Senter.
- 12202—Chicago Monkey Man Blues and Worried Anyhow Blues, Ida Cox.

## Beautiful, Harmonious Spirituals—For Every Christian Home

- 12225—Swing Low Sweet Chariot and I'm a Pilgrim, Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.
- 12221—Jerusalem Morn and Do You Call That Religion, Sunset Four.
- 12035—Father, Prepare Me and My Lord's Gonna Move This Wicked Race, Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.
- 12073—When All The Saints Come and That Old Time Religion, Paramount Jubilee Singers.
- 12217—Ezekiel Saw De Wheel and Crying Holy Unto The Lord, Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.

**Send No Money!** If your dealer hasn't Paramount Records, order direct from us, using the coupon at the right. Just check the ones you want and mail the coupon to us. **SEND NO MONEY!** Records shipped promptly. We pay postage and insurance. You pay nothing until you get your records. Then, give the postman 75 cents per record, plus 10 cents C. O. D. fee. We will send you **FREE**, new Paramount-Black Swan "Book of the Blues".

**THE NEW YORK RECORDING LABORATORIES**  
12 Paramount Bldg., Port Washington, Wis.

# Paramount

[Including Black Swan]

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- |           |           |           |
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| 12224 ( ) | 12211 ( ) | 12225 ( ) |
| 12227 ( ) | 12226 ( ) | 12221 ( ) |
| 12220 ( ) | 12223 ( ) | 12035 ( ) |
| 12231 ( ) | 20341 ( ) | 12073 ( ) |
| 12205 ( ) | 12202 ( ) | 12217 ( ) |

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 50. Advertisement of Priscilla Stewart's "Mr. Freddie Blues."  
(Chicago Defender. Oct 11, 1924. P7)





**M**ADAM "MA" RAINEY — the Mother of the Blues — has sung many great blues for Paramount, but none that is better than "Rough and Tumble Blues". After all is said, "Ma" proves that she knows more about Blues-singing than most of the others, and you will say so too when you hear Paramount Record No. 12311.

**W**HAT she does to three "mamas" who try to lay hands on her man is too good for words. She maũs 'em, beats 'em, chases 'em — even kills one — because they "got no right monkeying with her brown-eyed papa". Hear "Ma" Rainey sing this "Rough and Tumble Blues" on Paramount Record No. 12311. Get it today, at your dealer's, or mail us the coupon.

**12311 — Rough and Tumble Blues and Memphis Bound Blues, "Ma" Rainey and Her Georgia Jazz Band.**

- 12305—Mama Don't You Think I Know and Hot Papa Blues, "Papa Charlie" Jackson and His Blues Guitar.**
- 12303—Night Time Blues and Four Day Honey Scent, "Ma" Rainey, Acc. by Her Georgia Jazz Band.**
- 12306—Reckless Don't Care Mama Blues and Midnight Special, Soderica Miller. (Piano acc.)**
- 12307—Long Distance Blues and Lonesome Blues, Ida Cox, acc. by Lovie Austin and Her Blues Serenaders.**
- 12310—You Can't Shake It In Here and Lost John Blues, Novelities by Ray Logan.**
- 12300—Don't Shake It No More and Rampart Street Blues, Lovie Austin's Blues Serenaders.**

#### **Ethel Waters**

—the famous vaudeville star who has captivated millions on the stage—sings her latest hit for Paramount. Be sure to get this record—it's exclusive on Paramount:

**12313—Craving Blues, Ethel Waters, Acc. by Lovie Austin and Her Serenaders and Too Sweet For Words, (for dancing) by Lovie Austin's Blues Serenaders.**

- 12306—Down To The Bricks and I Found a Good Man After All, Jimmie O'Bryant's Famous Original Washboard Band.**
- 12297—The Joys and Switch It Miss Mitchell, Jimmie O'Bryant's Famous Original Washboard Band.**
- 12295—Stormy Sea Blues and Levee Camp Moan, "Ma" Rainey and Her Georgia Jazz Band.**
- 12296—Mama Don't Allow It and Take Me Back Blues, "Papa Charlie" Jackson.**
- 12336—Salty Dog Blues and Salt Lake City Blues, "Papa Charlie" Jackson.**
- 20341—Mobile Blues, Clarinet Solo by Boyd Sener and St. Louis Blues, Chicago DeLuxe Orchestra.**

#### **Here are the Most Beautiful Spirituals on Records**

- 12309—Plantation Days (Part I) and Plantation Days (Part II) —soloist, Grace Outlaw. Acc. by Sunset Four Jubilee Quartette.**
- 12385—Oh Lord What A Morning and Hand Me Down The Silver Trumpet, Sunset Four Jubilee Quartette.**
- 12334—Where Shall I Be and I'm Gonna Build Right on Dat Shore, Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.**
- 12301—Somebody's Always Talking About Me and Sit Down, Sit Down, I Can't Sit Down, Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.**

**Send No Money!** If your dealer hasn't Paramount records you want, check numbers on coupon and mail to us. Pay postman 75 cents each, plus small C.O.D. fee. We pay postage and insurance on orders for more than one record.

**Paramount**  
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Recording Laboratories  
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Please send me the records  
I've checked (✓)

12311 ( ) 12310 ( ) 12296 ( )  
12305 ( ) 12300 ( ) 12236 ( )  
12303 ( ) 12308 ( ) 20341 ( )  
12306 ( ) 12297 ( ) 12309 ( )  
12307 ( ) 12295 ( ) 12285 ( )  
12234 ( ) 12301 ( )

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 51. Advertisement of Ma Rainey's "Rough & Tumble Blues."  
(Chicago Defender. Oct 31, 1925. P7)

# "MEAN PAPA turn in your key"

**Clara Smith**  
"has murder in her eye"  
when she sings it on

**Columbia**  
Record 14022 D

It's Clara singing on  
the other side, too -  
"**BACK WOODS  
BLUES**"



CLARA SMITH



A phonograph without these records is like  
a backwoods without trees

**L**ISTEN, everybody! Here's a record so full of "come across" that if there are any loose keys lying around, they'll jump right up on the phonograph.

Yes, indeed! Clara sure does sing with authority - "Mean Papa, Turn in Your Key." And when you play it, you're going to hear something special because there's the slickest guitar accompaniment you ever heard anywhere. Some of the plunks sound just like a bullfrog singing bass. No fooling.

In "Back Woods Blues" Clara will take you into the deepest, darkest, bluest forest you ever heard of. Even Clara got so lonesome that she made a ukulele come along with the guitar to keep her company.

Turn in your feet at the Columbia Dealer's store to-day and get this powerful record. And while you're there listen to some more Columbia Records and take them home too. Just remember that the finest talent among colored artists makes records exclusively for Columbia. You are always sure to find the music you want, as you want it, at the Columbia Dealer's store.


COLUMBIA PHONOGRAPH CO., Inc.  
New York City

*Columbia has all the hits and usually first*

Sorrowful Blues. Violin and guitar accompaniment.	14020 D	10-inch	75c	He's Never Gonna Throw Me Down. George Williams and Beanie Brown. Alexander Brown at the piano.	14017 D	10-inch	75c
Rocking Chair Blues. Beanie Smith. Violin and piano accompaniment.	14018 D	10-inch	75c	You Need Some Loving. George Williams and Beanie Brown. Fletcher Henderson at the piano.	14014 D	10-inch	75c
Moonshine Blues. Beanie Smith. Irving Johns at the piano.	14019 D	10-inch	75c	Brother Low Down's Prayer. Brother Low Down's Sermon. Hooten and Hooten.	14016 D	10-inch	75c
West Indies Blues. Guitar and ukulele accompaniment.	124 D	10-inch	75c	My Daggone Lazy Man. I Don't Love Nobody (So I Don't Have No Blues). Clara Smith and Her Jazz Trio.	14015 D	10-inch	75c
The Clearing House Blues. Clara Smith. Guitar and piano accompaniment.	124 D	10-inch	75c	I'm Goin' Out To-night and Strut My Stuff. George Williams. Fletcher Henderson at the piano.	14015 D	10-inch	75c
Dunn's Cornet Blues. You've Never Heard the Blues. Johnny Dunn. Cornet solo with banjo and piano accompaniment.	124 D	10-inch	75c	I Won't Stand No Leaving Now. George Williams. Alexander Brown at the piano.	14015 D	10-inch	75c

**Columbia**  
New Process RECORDS

Figure 52. Advertisement of Clara Smith's "Mean Papa Turn in Your Key."  
(Chicago Defender. Jun 21, 1924. P5)



# "Don't Blame Me"

by IDA COX

*"I heard you say the other day  
That your lovin' daddy had gone;  
I heard you say I stole him away,  
But why pick me to blame it on."*

**YES**, she stole him away, and they've gone off together, but why blame it on the poor girl left behind? Ida Cox, Queen of the Blues, has put a world of feeling into this new Paramount Blues hit. And Lovie Austin's Serenaders accompany with some stuff that is red, red-hot. Be sure and ask your dealer for this popular feature Paramount Record No. 12381, or send us the coupon.

**[ 12381—Don't Blame Me and Scootie De Dee, Ida Cox, accompanied by Lovie Austin's Serenaders. ]**

**12372—East Coast Trot and Chicago Buzz** (both for dancing), Junie Cobb's Home Town Band.

**12354—Long Lonesome Blues and Got the Blues**, Blind Lemon Jefferson.

**12379—Scamp It, Vocal Duet, and Stevedore Man** by Grant and Wilson, instrument accompaniment.

**12373—Jack O'Diamond Blues and Check House Blues**, by Blind Lemon Jefferson.

**12386—Gallon Stamp and Chicago Moss Around**, Lovie Austin's Serenaders, (vocal chorus, Henry Williams).

**12374—Bessie's Sound Blues and Titanic**, Ma Rainey with her Georgia Band.

**12375—Up the Way Bound Blues and Four-Eleven Forty-Four**, "Papa Charlie" Jackson.


### Inspiring Spirituals

**12371—See the Sign of Judgment and Revival Days**, Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.

**12356—I'm Gonna Do All I Can for My Lord and Jesus Lay Your Head in the Window**, Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.

**12315—This Train is Bound for Glory and Lord, I'm Troubled**, Wood's Famous Blind Jubilee Singers.

**12378—Auto Holiness Sermon (Part I) and Auto Holiness Sermon (Part II)** by Cora Hopson.



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The Popular Race Record.

**Send No Money!**

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The New York Recording Laboratories  
435 Broadway, New York, N.Y.

Send me the records checked 1, 2 below, 75 cents each.

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( ) 12362	( ) 12380	( ) 12356
( ) 12354	( ) 12374	( ) 12315
( ) 12379	( ) 12375	( ) 12378

Name \_\_\_\_\_

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City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 53. Advertisement of Ida Cox's "Don't blame me."  
(Chicago Defender, Sep 11, 1926. P7)

---

# HUSTLIN' DAN

HEAR

## BESSIE SMITH SING

*"Talk about your lovers—  
He can more than satisfy me!"*



*Record No. 14554-D, 10-inch, 78c*

HUSTLIN' DAN . . . . . }  
BLACK MOUNTAIN BLUES } Vocals BESSIE SMITH

*Ask your dealer for the latest Race Record Catalog  
Columbia Phonograph Company, 1519 Broadway, New York City*



**Columbia** NEW PROCESS **Records**  
*Viva-tenal Recording - The Records without Scratch*

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Figure 54. Advertisement of Bessie Smith's "Hustling Dan."  
(*Chicago Defender*. Oct 11, 1930. P5)



# "PROVE IT ON ME BLUES"



*by*  
**"Ma" Rainey**

What's all this? Scandal? Maybe so, but you wouldn't have thought it of "Ma" Rainey. But look at that cop watching her! What does it all mean? But "Ma" just sings "Prove It On Me" in this great new Paramount Blues No. 12668, with a bang-up accompaniment by the Tub Jug Washboard Band. Don't fail to get this record from your dealer, or send us the coupon.

**[12668—Prove It On Me Blues and Hear Me Talking To You, "Ma" Rainey and the Tub Jug Washboard Band.]**

<b>12666—Penitentiary Blues and Long Lastin' Lovin',</b> Blind Lemon Jefferson and His Guitar.	<b>12668—Ash Tray Blues and No Need of Knockin' On the Blind,</b> "Papa Charlie" Jackson and His Blues Banjo.
<b>12664—Bone Orchard Blues and Western Union Blues,</b> Ida Cox; Piano, Banjo and Cornet Acc.	<b>12661—Saint Louis Man and Kentucky Stomp,</b> Dixie Four.
<b>12665—Low Down Mississippi Bottom and Tom Cat Blues,</b> "Mr. Freddie" Spruell; Guitar Acc.	<b>12657—Rumblin' And Ramblin' Sea Constrictor Blues and Detroit Bound Blues,</b> Blind Blake and His Guitar.
<b>12656—House Rent Stomp and Big Bill Blues,</b> Big Bill and Thomps; Guitar Acc.	
<b>12668—'Lectric Chair Blues and See That My Grave Is Kept Clean,</b> Blind Lemon Jefferson and His Guitar.	
<b>12659—Jimmy Rodgers Blue Yodel and Way Out On The Mountain,</b> Louis Warfield; Guitar Acc.	

**Favorite Spirituals**

**12669—Side On, King Jesus and Our Father,** Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.  
**12630—His Eye Is On The Sparrow and I Wouldn't Mind Dying If Dying Was All,** Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.

**SEND NO MONEY!** If your dealer is out of the records you want, send us the coupon below. Pay postman 75 cents for each record, plus small C. O. D. fee when he delivers records. *We pay postage on shipments of two or more records.*

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The New York Recording Laboratories  
 125 Paramount Bldg.,  
 Port Washington, Wis.  
 Send me the records checked (✓) below  
 75 cents each.

<input type="checkbox"/> 12668	<input type="checkbox"/> 12660	<input type="checkbox"/> 12608
<input type="checkbox"/> 12666	<input type="checkbox"/> 12661	<input type="checkbox"/> 12659
<input type="checkbox"/> 12664	<input type="checkbox"/> 12657	<input type="checkbox"/> 12663
<input type="checkbox"/> 12665	<input type="checkbox"/> 12656	<input type="checkbox"/> 12630

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 Address.....  
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Figure 55. Advertisement of Ma Rainey's "Prove it on Me Blues."  
 (Chicago Defender. Sep 22, 1928. P7)



# "MA RAINNEY'S BLACK BOTTOM"



**HERE** is a whale of a number by good old "Ma" Rainey and her famous Georgia Band. This record is so good, it just had to have Ma's name in the title, so it's called "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." When you hear it, you'll understand why it couldn't be called anything else — you can close your eyes and just see "Ma" black-bottoming around as those mean trombones and clarinets moan and chirp. Be sure to ask your dealer for Paramount No. 12590, or send us the coupon.

**[12590—Ma Rainey's Black Bottom and Last Go Round, "Ma" Rainey and Her Georgia Band.]**

<b>12588—Madison Street Rag and Jonestown Blues,</b> Vocal with Banjo Accompaniment by Banjo Joe.	<b>12578—Come Dead On You Blues and One Dime Blues,</b> Blind Lemon Jefferson and His Guitar.
<b>12595—Nappy Head Blues and Lonesome Atlanta Blues,</b> Bobby Grant; Guitar Accompaniment.	<b>12585—He's In The Jailhouse Now and Southern Rag,</b> Blind Blake and Guitar.
<b>12583—Hard Road Blues and Sea Heard Blues,</b> Blind Blake; Guitar Acc.	<b>12541—Rambler Blues and Struck Down Blues,</b> Blind Lemon Jefferson and Guitar.
<b>12582—Midnight Hour Blues and Give Me A Break Blues,</b> Ida Cox; Piano Acc. by Jesse Crump.	<b>12586—Jim Jackson's Kansas City Blues and A Little Bit Closer,</b> Tiny Parham and his "Forty" Five.
<b>12474—Match Box Blues and Easy Rider Blues,</b> Blind Lemon Jefferson and His Guitar.	

**Beautiful Spirituals**

**12589—I Have Anchored My Soul and King Jesus, Stand By Me,** Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.

**12635—Father, Prepare Me and My Lord's Gonna Move This Wicked Race,** Norfolk Jubilee Quartette.

**SEND NO MONEY!** If your dealer is out of the records you want, send us the coupon below. Pay postman 75 cents for each record, plus small C. O. D. fee when he delivers records. We pay postage on shipments of two or more records.

**Electrically Recorded!**  
 Paramount Records are recorded by the latest new electric method. Greater volume, amazingly clear tone. Always the best music — first on Paramount!

**The New York Recording Laboratories**  
 12 Paramount Bldg., Port Washington, N.Y.  
 Send me the records checked ( ) below. 75 cents each.

( ) 12590	( ) 12582	( ) 12586
( ) 12588	( ) 12578	( ) 12474
( ) 12595	( ) 12585	( ) 12541
( ) 12583	( ) 12586	( ) 12589

**Paramount**  
 The Popular Race Record

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 City..... State.....

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Figure 56. Advertisement of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom."  
 (Chicago Defender. Feb 18, 1928. P7)



Figure 57. Photo of Ma Rainey. (Courtesy Frank Driggs collection)



Figure 58. Photo of "Ma Rainey's Jazz Hounds."  
(Courtesy Jim Prohaska. Excerpted from 78 *Quartly* No. 12, Pp 40.)





Figure 59. Photo of Young Gertrude Pridgett. (Courtesy Blues Calendar 2019.)



Figure 60. Photo of Ma Rainey and Thomas A. Dorsey.

(Courtesy Blues Calendar 2019.)



Figure 61. Ma Rainey Mistakenly Marked as “Moranie.” (Courtesy of University of Mississippi.)



Figure 62. Ma Rainey Greets a Fan in a Gown with Her Famous Necklace and Earrings of Gold Coins. (Courtesy Jac Obrecht Music Archive)





### "MA" RAINEY

"Mother of the Blues"

Recognized as the greatest Blues Singer ever known. Her records are breaking all records for popularity. "Ma" is the Mother of the Blues, because she really taught many of the younger stars how to sing Blues. They call "Ma" Rainey the gold-neck woman of the Blues because of her necklace of twenty-dollar gold pieces. But it's her golden voice, also, that has earned her the title. She's the only Blues singer of the Race elevated to the title of "Madame".

**12200—THE FAMOUS MYSTERY RECORD** Acc. Lovie Austin's Blues Serenaders  
**HONEY WHERE YOU BEEN SO LONG** Acc. Lovie Austin's Blues Serenaders  
Madam "Ma" Rainey  
Madam "Ma" Rainey

**12098—DREAM BLUES** Acc. Two Guitars, Pruett Twins Madam "Ma" Rainey  
**LOST WANDERING BLUES** Acc. Two Guitars, Pruett Twins  
Madam "Ma" Rainey

More "Ma" Rainey Records on Next Page

Figure 63. Ma Rainey as "the gold-neck woman of the Blues." (Courtesy Blues Archive.)

# "Those Dogs of Mine"



"Oh, Lawdy, how the sun do shine  
Down on those dogs of mine"  
—here "Ma" Rainey sing the rest of it

## "Ma" Rainey's FAMOUS Corn Field Blues

**"O** H, Lawdy, those dogs of mine — they sure do worry me all the time!" "Ma" Rainey, Mother of the Blues, sings a Blues that appeals to every man or woman who wears shoes. Corns — corns — corns — she had to keep out of the light of the sun — had to walk on the shady side of the street — well, hear all the details in the Corn Field Blues. "Ma" Rainey calls it "Those Dogs of Mine". You call for Paramount No. 12215.

**A Mean List of New Blues**

12215—Those Dogs of Mine (Corn Field Blues) and Lucky Rock Blues. "Ma" Rainey, etc. by Royal Barnardine.

**Be Sure To Get These Two!**

12216—Blues Ain't Rainey: One Set and Last Time Blues, etc. etc. by Louis Austin and Ma Rainey.

12217—Fugle Toss Blues and Don't Shake It No More. Three Sets, etc. by Ma Rainey and Royal Barnardine.

12218—Carl Karl Daddy Blues and George Sam Blues. Arns. Leo Chabrier.

12219—Tall Ten Toss Ma and Ten's Road Ma When Tai Long Goss, Ethel Waters. Piano and vocal act.

12220—Thirty-Three Street Blues and Nonsense, piano solo by Jelly Roll Morton.

12221—Ten Ain't Fadder! Ma and Ten Blues. Pianola. Brown. Piano act.

12222—Dress Blues and Last Wandering Blues. "Ma" Rainey's Supreme Record. (See picture on the record)

12223—Red River Blues and Honey Blues. Little Brown.

12224—Chicago Mender Ma Blues and Wanted Asphew Blues. Ma Cox.

**Best Sacred Songs of the Race**

12225—My Lord's Gonna Move This Wicked Race and Father Prepare Ma. Norfolk Jubilee Quartet.

12226—When All the Saints Come Marching In and That Old Time Religion. Paramount Jubilee Singers.

12227—Gathered Saw De Wheel and Crying Holy Unto the Lord. Norfolk Jubilee Quartet.

**Send No Money!** If your dealer can't supply you with any of the above Paramount Records, order direct from us, using the coupon at the right. Records shipped postpaid. 75¢ each, plus 10¢ C.O.D. charge. Send no money. Pay the postman. We pay postage and insurance. Write for free, big, Paramount Black Swan "Book of the Blues."

Again wanted where we have no dealers.



Above is shown Madame "Ma" Rainey, Paramount's world-famous Mother of the Blues. She is the first Blues singer ever elevated to the heights of "Madame".

Madame Rainey is only one of the great Race stars illustrated in the Paramount-Black Swan big, new "Book of the Blues". Send us your name and address and we will send you a free copy of this book. It contains pictures and intimate, personal facts about such noted artists as

"Ma" Rainey	Edmonia Henderson
Ida Cox	Edna Hicks
Travis Smith	Lottie Beaman
Ethel Waters	Levie Austin
Faye Barnes	Norfolk Jazz Quartette

and scores of others.

Send for your complimentary copy today.

THE NEW YORK RECORDING LABORATORIES  
33 PARAMOUNT BUILDING  
**Paramount**  
(Including Black Swan)  
**The Popular Race Record**

SEE U.S. PAT. OFF.

**The New York Recording Laboratories**  
117 Paramount Bldg. Park Washington, N.Y.

Send me the following records, C.O.D., 75¢ each each, postage paid.

12215 ( )	12216 ( )	12217 ( )
12218 ( )	12219 ( )	12220 ( )
12221 ( )	12222 ( )	12223 ( )
12224 ( )	12225 ( )	12226 ( )

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 64. Advertisement of Ma Rainey's "Those Dogs of Mine."  
(Courtesy Blues Archive.)

# I Have Killed My Man

## Bloodthirsty Woman Confesses!

"You can put me down and let me walk! He was the only man I ever loved! Yes! I killed my man—a low-down, good-for-nothin' fellow.

"I told him BLOOD was in my eye—still he wouldn't listen to me. 'Stead of givin' him SUGAR I put my KNIFE in him!

"I am a mighty mean woman and won't stand for no back-talk."

And now there is a terrible, sinking hoodoo that creeps after this woman wherever she goes and lets her feel the touch of cold, clammy hands. Soul and body are being racked by BLOOD THIRSTY BLUES!

## Never Seen So Much Blood

"I've never seen so much blood! Blood—blood! Don't you see all that blood?"

Oh! You are filled with pity for this blood thirsty woman whose soul is in such TORMENT! There comes before her vision the horrible sight of the man she loved. There he is—dead upon the floor—and he welters in his blood. The red fangs of vengeance drove her into a mad

passion. But when the toll was taken there came to her tortured mind NO RECOMPENSE!

NOW YOU CAN HEAR THAT SUFFERING HEART SOBBING OUT ITS STORY OF WOE.

Oh, you, whose hearts are tender—listen and thrill to the tale of BLOOD THIRSTY BLUES! Okeh Record No. 8531.

## One More Sniffle



Here she is with "DOPE HEAD BLUES!" There's nothin' that little brown lady don't think she owns. And how she feels! Just like a bitin' rooster. And then, "Sam, go get my aeroplane, and drive it to my door. Who's that followin' me all 'round? That's the Prince of Wales. And he sure has me worried!

"I'll just take one more sniff and that will put us all in jail."

LISTEN TO WHAT DOPE HEAD BLUES makes one woman see, feel and hear. Okeh record No. 8531.



## EXTRA!

The story with all its horrors is sung by

**Victoria Spivey**

(Exclusive Okeh Artist)

on

**Okeh Record No. 8531**

A Record That Groans With Tragedy

Only 75c

Ask for ...

8531

Blood-Thirsty Blues

Dope Head Blues

Sung by VICTORIA SPIVEY with Guitar Accompaniment

RACE

**Okeh**  
ELECTRIC

RECORDS

OKEH PHONOGRAPH CORPORATION

25 West 45th Street, New York, N. Y.

Figure 65. Advertisement of Victoria Spivey's "Blood-Thirsty Blues."  
(Chicago Defender. Jan 28, 1928. P3)

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