Shug Avery’s sisters: Female Blues Singers

In *The Color Purple*, Shug Avery is a blues singer, who entertains in “juke joints.” Female blues singers had a freedom of expression that other women of their time did not; popular blues singers like Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith, just like Shug, were able to be wild and speak the truth as they saw it in a way that other women were not.

Ma Rainey

The first professional blues singer, “Ma” Rainey was known as “The Mother of the Blues.”

She was born Gertrude Pridgett on April 26, 1886, in Columbus, Georgia. Inspired by her parents, who had performed in minstrel shows, she was singing onstage by the age of fourteen. She left home to tour with a group called “The Rabbit Foot Minstrels.” In 1902, while in St. Louis, she heard a blues song sung by a local girl, and she began performing songs and others like it in her act.

Two years later, she married the singer William Rainey. He was known as “Pa” Rainey, so Gertrude dubbed herself “Ma” Rainey. The pair continued to tour with the Rabbit Foot Minstrels and other groups, billing themselves as “Rainey and Rainey, Assassins of the Blues.”

Ma Rainey had an outspoken, brassy style on stage. Several of her teeth were gold, and she always appeared in extravagant sequined outfits with her trademark necklace of gold coins.

She was a mentor to future blues singer Bessie Smith, who was hired as a dancer in the same performing troupe as the Raineys. (Smith left the troupe to start her own career as a singer around 1915.)

Ma Rainey began recording her songs in 1923, and in the next five years recorded over 100 songs. Styles began to change, however, and by 1933 her popularity had waned. In 1939, Ma Rainey died of a heart attack.

“Black Cat, Hoot Owl Blues” (recorded by Ma Rainey in 1928)

Black cat on my door-step, black cat on my window-sill
If one black cat don’t cross me, another black cat will

Last night a hoot owl come and sit right over my door
A feelin’ seems to tell me I’ll never see my man no mo’

I feel my left side a-jumpin’, my heart a-bumpin’, I’m mindin’ my P’s and Q’s
I feel my brain a-thumpin’, I’ve got no time to lose
Mama’s superstitious, tryin’ to overcome these blues
Bessie Smith

Bessie Smith was born in 1894 in Chattanooga, Tennessee. After a brief stint working as a dancer and getting to know blues legend Ma Rainey, twenty-year-old Bessie Smith began working as a blues singer herself. By 1920 she was well known throughout the South, as well as up and down the East coast.

She was an imposing presence on stage: six feet tall and 200 pounds, with a voice that could fill a room. Like other blues singers, she used her “chest” voice (the lower vocal register) to “shout” the tunes, knowing instinctively how to adjust any melody to keep it in the strongest part of her range.

She began making blues recordings in 1923, which made her popular nationwide. She toured extensively throughout the South, traveling in her own railroad car, becoming the highest paid black entertainer in the country.

Like all performing artists, her career suffered when the Great Depression struck. She still toured as much as she could throughout the 1930s, singing in clubs. She made one appearance on Broadway, in the 1929 musical Pansy. The show flopped, but Smith received good reviews.

On her way to a performance in Clarksdale, Mississippi, Bessie Smith was in a car accident that nearly severed her arm and left her near death. She was taken to the Afro-Hospital in Clarksdale (hospitals in the South were divided between those serving African-Americans, and those that were “white only”). She died of her injuries that day, September 26, 1937.

“Thinking Blues” (lyrics by Bessie Smith)

Did you ever sit thinking with a thousand things on your mind?
Did you ever sit thinking with a thousand things on your mind?
Thinking about someone who has treated you so nice and kind

You’ll get an old letter and you begin to read
You’ll get an old letter and you begin to read
Got the blues so bad tell that man of mine I wanna be

Don’t you hear me baby, knocking on your door?
Don’t you hear me baby, knocking on your door?
Have you got the nerve to drive me from your door?

Have you got the nerve to say that you don’t want me no more?
Have you got the nerve to say that you don’t want me no more?
The good book said you got to reap what you sow

Take me back baby, try me one more time
Take me back baby, try me one more time
That’s the only way I can get these thinking blues off my mind
Ethel Waters (1896-1977)  
Populated the song "Stormy Weather"; the first African-American woman to be given equal billing with her white co-stars on Broadway.

Billie Holiday (1915-1959)  
"Lady Day" started out as a jazz and blues singer in Harlem clubs in the mid 1930s, always performing with a signature white gardenia in her hair. She became popular with black and white audiences alike, becoming one of the first black singers to perform with white bands. She is best known for her songs "God Bless the Child," and "Strange Fruit."

Dinah Washington (1924-1963)  
Known as the "Queen of the Blues", she began performing with jazz musician Lionel Hampton in the 1940s. She had her biggest hit with the Grammy Award-winning "What A Difference a Day Makes," released in 1959.

Nina Simone (1933-2003)  
Trained as a classical pianist, she drew on jazz, soul and blues styles in her singing, with songs such as "I Want A Little Sugar In My Bowl." Known as the "High Priestess of Soul," she was active in the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Tina Turner (1939 - )  
She began her career with husband Ike Turner, with hits such as "River Deep, Mountain High" and "Proud Mary" in 1971. After leaving her abusive marriage in 1978, she began a solo career, earning three Grammy Awards in 1985 for "What's Love Got to Do With It? She was included in the 2005 Kennedy Center Honors.

Aretha Franklin (1942 - )  
Known as the "Queen of Soul," she started off singing gospel music at her father's church. Signed to a record contract by age 14, she had her first hits in the 1960s with "You Make Me Feel (Like A Natural Woman)" and "Respect." She has won 16 Grammys, and was the first woman inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

Patti LaBelle (1944 - )  
She began as the lead singer of Patti LaBelle & the Bluebells (later just "LaBelle"); their biggest hit was 1975's "Lady Marmalade." She went solo and had a string of hits throughout the 80s and 90s, including "New Attitude" and "On My Own."

Chaka Khan (1953-)  
She first came to prominence as the singer of the funk band Rufus; she had a #1 hit single in 1978 with "I'm Every Woman."

Etta James (1938 - )  
Her first recording, the song "The Wallflower" was a hit in 1954. She became best known for her songs "At Last", "Tell Mama" and "I'd Rather Go Blind," released by Chess Records in the 1960s. Her album Mystery Lady, a collection of songs associated with Billie Holiday, won a Grammy in 1994; she was honored with the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 2003.

Macy Gray (1970- )  
Sometimes described as "Billie Holiday meets Tina Turner", Macy Gray won the 2001 Grammy Award for Best Female Pop Vocal Performance for "I Try"