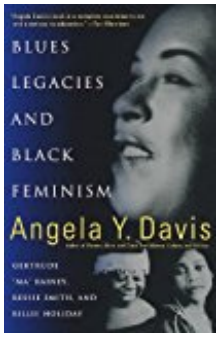
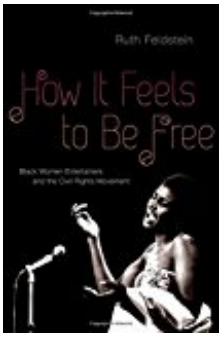
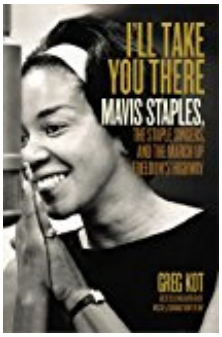
"All The Women Are White, All The Blacks Are Men, But Some Of Us Are Brave": On the Legacy of Black Women Entertainers



"Sometimes we'd make a six-hundred-mile jump and stop only once," Billie Holiday wrote in her autobiography *Lady Sings the Blues* about touring in the Jim Crow South. "Then it would be a place where I couldn't get served, let alone crash the toilet without causing a scene. At first I used to be ashamed. Then finally I just said to hell with it. When I had to go I'd just ask the bus driver to stop and let me off at the side of the road. I'd rather go in the bushes than take a chance in the restaurants and towns."



In 1939, Billie Holiday first performed "Strange Fruit," a song evoking the horrors of lynching and racial injustice. The song would remain central to Holiday's repertoire. Holiday's performances and recordings of the song, Angela Davis notes in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1998), "singlehandedly changed the politics of American popular culture and put the elements of protest and resistance back at the center of contemporary black musical culture."



In her fascinating and rigorously thoughtful book, Davis delves into the lives and music of Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday, pioneers on the black entertainment circuit, revealing how these women, along with a host of black women artists, defied conventions of the dominant culture by incorporating into their work their own social consciousness based on their experience as black women. Most of these women did not begin their careers having an explicit political commitment but rather "moved into the stream of political radicalization by following paths carved out by their art." Early blues singers, including Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, sang about subjects largely shunned from popular culture such as female sexual pleasure, extramarital relationships, domestic violence, gender and racial inequality. "The women who sang the blues did not typically affirm female resignation and powerlessness," Davis writes. They consistently challenged the notion that women's "place" was in the domestic sphere and asserted their sexual equality with men. Black women of the 1920s blues era, Davis points out, were already addressing issues that later became central to second wave feminism.

Ruth Feldstein's *How It Feels To Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* (2013) explores the lives and careers of singer and actor Lena Horne, South African folk singer Miriam Makeba, jazz vocalist and pianist Nina Simone, jazz vocalist and actor Abbey Lincoln, and actors Diahann Carroll and Cicely Tyson. Feldstein shows how all six women used their celebrity status to support black activism and "played with gender roles as they performed black womanhood in new and distinct ways." They drew attention to "unequal relationships between blacks and whites *and* to relationships between men and women."

When a segregationist bombing of a Baptist Church killed four black girls in Birmingham on September 15, 1963, Nina Simone sat down and in a "rush of fury, hatred and determination" penned "Mississippi Goddam." It was the first of many songs Simone wrote and performed dramatically supporting struggles for black freedom in the U.S. Nicknamed the "High Priestess of Soul" and labelled one of the best jazz singers alive, in her nearly twenty albums, along with romantic heartbreak, her songs included subjects such as segregation's effects on children, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., gender discrimination, and color consciousness. As early as 1963, "Nina Simone used music, lyrics, and performance strategies on and offstage to develop black power perspectives that were free of misogyny and claimed black women's experiences as relevant."

Simone's 1966 song "Four Women," one of her biggest hits, addressed the connection between gender and racial discrimination, and strove to make black women's voices on the subject of black freedom heard. As Feldstein points out, "While African American women participated extensively in movements of black power and in expressions of black cultural nationalism -- as leaders, grassroots activists, and writers, and in official organizations as well as countless grassroots enterprises -- many organizations remained largely male-dominated. Assertions of black male pride and a celebration of aggressive masculinity remained at the rhetorical and visual center of many expressions of black power, regardless of all that women activists were doing." In response, Simone wrote "Go Limp" satirizing the celebration of male toughness and sexual potency in black activism. Simone "claimed the power of sexuality from a woman's point of view, and this power was central to her vision of black political liberation."

Simone deeply believed that relationships between women and gender solidarity were central to black pride. The person who led her to understand this was her good friend, the playwright Lorraine Hansberry, author of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Because of Hansberry, Simone said, "I started to think about myself as a black person in a country run by white people and a woman in a world run by men." Inspired by Hansberry's work, Simone wrote "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black," the song that became an anthem of black pride and an R&B hit.

Discovered by Harry Belafonte, Miriam Makeba's talent, bravery, and musical accomplishments have been overshadowed by the famous men she was surrounded by, including Black Panther Stokely Carmichael, one of her husbands. Known as the "First Lady of African Music," "Mama Africa," and the "Empress of African Song," Makeba had a successful singing career in South Africa before she left in 1959, unable to live under apartheid anymore. Following her brief but powerful cameo in Lionel Rogosin's acclaimed anti-apartheid film *Come Back, Africa* (1959), she was immediately booked into popular venues such as the Village

Vanguard and on popular TV variety shows, including *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

Aware that physical appearance is a political and cultural force, the chic Makeba began to wear her hair "short and wooly." She explained that wearing her hair naturally was profoundly significant for black freedom and power because "It's as though Negro women are finally admitting they're proud of their heritage..." In the 1970s, actor Cicely Tyson affirmed that playing dignified black women with natural hair was one way she did political work.

Makeba's music -- African folk, world folk, with some jazz fusion -- seemed mostly apolitical; she claimed she was just an entertainer and didn't want to engage in political debates. But from within the male-dominated politicized subcultures in both South Africa and the U.S., she succeeded in linking, writes Feldstein, "race relations in South Africa and in the United States; she connected pan-African anticolonialism and American civil rights; and she articulated a position in which desirable black femininity and the racial pride associated with 'black is beautiful' and black power coexisted."

Lena Horne, 1940s diva and icon of black female glamor, rejected the stereotype of black women as either sexualized Jezebels or subordinate Mammies. In 1941, Horne became the first African American woman to sign a contract with a major Hollywood studio, with a clause in her contract stipulating she would not be required to play maids on film. In a 1966 *Ebony* issue devoted to "The Negro Woman," Horne wrote an article called "The Three-Horned Dilemma Facing Negro Women," on the relationships "privileged Negro Women" navigated with "Negro males, the lowly poor, and white liberal women." Similar to Nina Simone, Horne's conclusion was that "solidarity" among black women was paramount to their ultimate success.

Greg Kot's highly readable *I'll Take You There: Mavis Staples, The Staples Singers, and the March Up Freedom's Highway* (2014) highlights that although her father Pops Staples was an incredibly strong influence on her career, Mavis's relationships with other female performers, such as Mahalia Jackson and Aretha Franklin, were crucial to her both as a woman and an artist. While Mavis did Aretha's hair for gigs and album covers, Aretha offered Mavis personal and professional advice. Mahalia Jackson lived down the street; from a young age Mavis studied her, emulating her idol's total devotion to her art and her "ability to will herself inside the narrative" of her songs.

Kot follows the family's trajectory from rural Mississippi to Chicago, chronicling the vicissitudes of Mavis's sixty-year career. Mavis and her family's gospel music fused with soul, folk, and eventually rock and contributed to the civil rights movement. Their 1965 song "Freedom Highway," in response to the police attack on the protest march in Selma, Alabama, became one of the era's best-loved songs. The group frequently played at Martin Luther King Jr.'s rallies and marches. Mavis's unique sound and performance style -- often appearing overcome by her songs -- influenced generations of musicians, including Bob Dylan, Prince, Bonnie Raitt, David Byrne, Ry Cooder, and the Rolling Stones.

These three books about black women in the entertainment industry provide platforms on which so many extraordinarily talented, complicated, and courageous women can once again be seen and heard. Their work and their example speak out for black women, but ultimately they speak out for humanity itself.

NB*:* "All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave," a phrase that brilliantly expresses the disenfranchisement many black women experience in the U.S., is the title of a seminal book of essays written by a collective of black women academics in the 1980s. The essays range widely from personal to political theory, to literary criticism and music history. The book argues for the development of a Black Women's Studies program to adequately address the dilemmas and issues black women of all educational and economic classes confront in their daily lives.

Jenny McPhee's books include A Man of No Moon*,* No Ordinary Matter*,* The Center of Things*, and* Girls: Ordinary Girls and their Extraordinary Pursuits*. She teaches creative writing at the Central Foundation Boys' School and is a founding board member of the Bronx Academy of Letters. She lives in London but mostly she resides at www.jennymcphee.com.*