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Review: Bessie (HBO films, 2015, 115 minutes)

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Bessie opens with an arresting shot of Queen Latifah as singer Bessie Smith, dressed in the white costume familiarized by a widely reproduced photograph, with blue tones emphasizing both interiority (her eyes are closed, and the music viewers hear is playing in her head), and the blues genre associated with her. When the shift to every day colors returns viewers to the movie's present (1927), an unsmiling Bessie walks through an adoring backstage crowd, press cameras flashing, into a waiting car. Rachel Portman's score suggests foreboding; the next long shot shows Bessie framed in a doorway as she calls out a futile, unanswered "Hello?" Flashbacks reveals a small black girl, banging on a locked ice box and huddled under a bed, crying for an absent mother. When the camera returns to the film's present, Bessie climbs the stairs in her grand, empty house, the child's voice echoing, "Where are you, where are you?"

In the opening of this long-awaited film about a major historical figure, a powerful working-class Black female musical performer, striking production values, especially color and sound design, introduce a clichéd biopic formula: a beloved musical celebrity at the height of success cannot find comfort at home because of childhood deprivation and demons.

But in the very next scene, moving back in time to Atlanta, 1913, the formula disappears. Suddenly the narrative focus shifts to black female sexual self-determination, musical collaboration, and transgressive sexual modernism amid the vitality of black musical performance in Jim Crow America. After panning across performers backstage, the camera moves into the back alley, where we hear heavy breathing and the clink of bottles. We see Bessie Smith with a male partner, enjoying sexual foreplay but requesting a halt before intercourse. She breaks an empty bottle and uses it to physically enforce her own volition; she wants to “mess around” but “not do all that.” Someone, whom viewers later find out is her brother (Tory Kittles) helps clean her wounds and gets her back on stage. Bessie belts out “Young Woman’s Blues” to a rowdy crowd, and tries to bargain, without success, with the white manager, for decent wages for the week’s work. A smash cut viewers see Bessie’s toes as she wakes up in a rooming house bed, followed by a quick flashback to a warm memory of her mother’s physical presence. Then the camera moves back to reveal that Bessie’s bed partner is a loving woman, Lucille (Tika Sumter), who shares her sexual pleasure *and* encourages her to take performing risks. These are images rarely, if ever, captured in mainstream American cinema.

Female musical collaboration amid Black vaudeville’s raucous entertainment is highlighted as central to Bessie Smith’s performance trajectory when “queen of rhythm, the mother of the Blues” and successful vaudeville performer Gertrude “Ma” Rainey (Mo’Nique) appears on screen. Director Dee Rees imagined Ma’s character to be responsible for showing Bessie how to engage audiences directly, demand better

deals, and be unapologetic about sexual pleasures with women. A startling highlight is a later scene of Ma Rainey, abandoning her sequined dress for a man's tuxedo, delighting Bessie and a Black cabaret audience of men and women as she performs "Prove it on Me Blues," a song later generations would celebrate as a rare and powerful lyrical stance of explicit and defiant lesbian desire that has been largely written out of musical history. Although the film manufactures a competition between the two women to motivate Bessie to leave the show and strike out on her own, it depicts Ma Rainey's pleasure in Bessie's eventual recording success and offers a fantastic scene where their shared history as larger-than-life performers buoys them both. These powerful connections between the women coexist comfortably with their relationships with their men: Ma Rainey had a formidable ally in her husband and manager, "Pa" Rainey (Charles Dutton); while Jack Gee (Michael Kenneth Williams), Bessie's husband and manager, and Richard Morgan (Mike Epps), her bootlegger and lover are portrayed as compelling and complex characters. The film's representation of multi-faceted and coexisting sexual relationships and partnerships as unremarkable is one of its most striking contributions.

That Bessie was finally realized via HBO's deep pockets, promised creative autonomy, and limited premium cable access, after many years of false starts as a theatrical release, reveals something about the relative state of studio film and television production. Plans for a Bessie film had been floating around since the early 1970s, when Columbia Records' 1970 reissue of her songs, a well-researched

biographical account by record producer and music writer Chris Albertson, and Janis Joplin's musical homage secured a place for Bessie Smith in the blues revival. But the imagination in mainstream Hollywood filmmaking for racial representation in general and musicians in particular was grotesquely limited, as exemplified by an early Warner Brothers story rejection on the grounds that "Bessie Smith was not on drugs and this is not the five handkerchief stuff that 'Lady Sings the Blues' is made of" (Chris Albertson, *Bessie*, 2003, p. 288). By the early 1990s, when Columbia Pictures revived the film option and engaged playwright Horton Foote to prepare a script, Albertson suggested Queen Latifah, then in her early twenties, as someone who could portray Bessie. Queen Latifah was already a prominent artist with hit albums ranging across hip-hop, reggae, and jazz, and spotlighting issues facing Black women. She had organized her own production company, Flavor Unit Management, and was beginning an acting career on television and in film. At that time, she did not know who Bessie Smith was.

After the initial Columbia financing fell apart, the Bessie project languished until 2009, when uncredited producer Hallie Foote, who had inherited the film rights and her father's screenplay after his death, finally arranged a deal with HBO, with an assist from producers Richard and Lili Zanuck. In 2013 the Bessie project began to take its current shape when Dee Rees, whose acclaimed first feature film was Pariah (2011), a lesbian coming-of-age story, signed on, first as writer and then as director. Like Bessie, Rees grew up in Tennessee, and she remembered listening to her grandmother's Bessie Smith records, and to the 1980 original cast recording of New

Orleans playwright, actor, dancer, director Vernal Bagneris's recreation of black vaudeville music and dance in *One Mo' Time*, a long-running off-Broadway and traveling production. (Songs from this production appear in the film's soundtrack and Rees brought on Bagneris to serve as the film's choreographer).

Queen Latifah and Dee Rees can both be considered as auteurs of this film. Its musical authority is the product of Queen Latifah's dedication to get the music right, because as she commented, "her songs were the story of her life." She worked on mastering Bessie Smith's musical range, switching from gospel to blues in the same song, her phrasing, her pronunciation as well as her extraordinarily assertive and glowing mode of performance. On screen she offers powerful renditions of six of Bessie Smith's songs, and joins her for a "remastered" duet of "Gimme a Pigfoot and a Bottle of Beer," played over the final credits. Each song is performed in a distinct emotional register. In a North Carolina tent show, after Latifah's Bessie fiercely confronts and interrupts KKK terrorism, her rendition of "Preachin' the Blues," performed in call and response amidst a working-class crowd singing and dancing, is particularly joyous and transformative. This atmosphere contrasts sharply with a following scene at the home of writer and black arts patron Carl Van Vechten, where Bessie pointedly chooses to sing "Work House Blues" to a disdainful gathering of primarily white fancy-dress high-society. In interviews, Dee Rees has credited Angela Davis's 1998 book, Blues Legacies and Black Feminism as her "bible." Davis's argument that blues written and sung by Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith voiced otherwise unacknowledged forms of working-class Black feminist consciousness,

particularly in claiming women's freedom to love and desire and move on, clearly shaped the film's sensibility.

The film narrative contrasts the working life and created family among performers with disappointed hopes and messy entanglements of inherited and legalized family connections; the former more compellingly than the latter. It does not ignore vaudeville's racialized and gender-based constraints, for example, the arduous working conditions and unreliable payment for black performers, and the paper bag color standard used to exclude women considered "too dark." The film emphasizes Bessie's performing as sustaining to her and compelling to audiences, independent from the experience of recording, over which she had much less control. To create Bessie Smith's interior life and to represent her subjectivity, Rees has said that she turned to the motherless child character imagined by Jamaica Kincaid in her novel, *The Autobiography of My Mother* (199). The film represents Bessie's various appetites as voracious, not easily satisfied, and sometimes self-destructive. The origins of these insatiable appetites are repetitively explained by flashback of childhood familial deprivations and maternal loss embodied in her accusatory sister Viola (Khandi Alexander). Only once, but in a beautifully-shot unhurried sequence, do we see Bessie's unblinking self-scrutiny, gazing into a mirror at her naked body.

As expected in a feature film, dramatic momentum occasionally trumps historical chronology and complexity. Repeated images of trains emphasize motion but blur the passing of time and Bessie's relocation from the South to the North. The

narrative emphasizes acrimony over the reciprocity which helped to sustain working-class families like the Smiths, as painstakingly documented by Michele Scott's *Blues Empress in Black Chattanooga* (2008). The film pointedly but perhaps too narrowly represents the tensions between rough and respectable expressive culture by showcasing the black-owned Black Swan Recording company's rejection of Bessie Smith's musical vocabulary in preference for Ethel Water's smoother blues delivery, leaving out religious objections to the blues. The film simplifies Bessie Smith's ongoing appeal to various white audiences by attributing patronizing exoticizing to Carl Van Vechten in sharp contrast with enthusiastic loyalty and generous promotion from record producer John Hammond; more nuanced accounts would complicate both these characterizations. But Bessie's sweeping imaginative vision of Bessie Smith's resilience and reinvention, and more generally, of black performance, musical speech, and sexual modernism, conveys other very important and frequently neglected historical possibilities.