

## The Arts

### Gay Blues and Jazz Released

By Michelle Thomas

The Twenties and Thirties have for the most part been characterized by the music of Gershwin, Kern, and Berlin – music of wit and sophistication that spoke to the upper crust. One does not associate that period with sexually explicit music, some of it so explicit that it might even make Madonna blush to sing it.

*Sissy Man Blues: 25 Authentic Straight and Gay Blues and Jazz Vocals* (Jass Records) is a collection of such songs that is both fascinating and surprising in the sense that gays and lesbians were given the opportunity to sing the blues while straight vocalists sang of gays and lesbians without much ado in the same period.

Given that the audiences were often in bars, speakeasies, and bordellos which gays and lesbians were known to frequent, a good number of the songs are specifically aimed at such audiences. "If you can't send me a woman, send me a sissy man," sings Connie McLean in "Sissy Man Blues," a song of thwarted sexual encounters that leads him to make that particular request.

Some of the women featured here do not have that problem of sexual ambiguity; they know what they want. Ma Rainey sings proudly in "Prove it on Me Blues:" "I go with women cuz I don't like no man." She speaks of her woman after a fight: "Where she went I don't know; I follow her everywhere she goes."

Bessie Jackson sings of B.D. (bull dyke) women in "B.D. Women Blues:" "B.D. women need no man.../ They walk like a natural man/ lay their jive like a

natural man/ They sure is rough/ and they drink plenty of whiskey." In "Two Old Maids in a Folding Bed," Monette Moores sings of two women, one who says to the other, "I admire your playful tactics."

Many references to gays and lesbians are made in passing in other songs. George Hannah mentions two women hand in hand in "The Boy in the Boat" and says "Just look 'em over and understand." In "Someone's Been Using That Thing," the Hokum Boys mention "men who powder their faces" and women who "talked like men" as people who have been using that "thing."

Obviously, these songs were not part of the mainstream. They were certainly not featured on the Paul Whiteman radio show or covered by Bing Crosby. They were recorded with primitive equipment and released as "race" records by record companies, believing that blues and jazz appealed to a limited audience. Because of this attitude, many of these records languished in obscurity until recently.

Jass Records should be commended for compiling many of these songs for modern audiences. Not only is this significant in terms of music history, it is a piece of gay and lesbian history, bearing witness to a time and place where gays and lesbians were simply accepted as a part of the life many of these blues and jazz artists lived.

(*Sissy Man Blues* can be obtained from either Jass Records, 611 Broadway, Suite 411Q, New York, NY 10012 or Ladyslipper Inc., P.O. Box 3124-R, Durham, NC 27715)

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