

## Women in the Blues ©

By Connie J. Schlosberg

Blues music is something to be felt. It encompasses emotions and attitudes and both strangely and beautifully, the art knows no gender. Blues are both masculine and feminine. Women came into the blues with both barrels loaded. At a time when women were just getting their right to vote, these female blues singers kicked out the jams and showed their boldness and their bravery as open-minded women. This discussion will focus on four female blues songs from both past and present. These women and their songs show that women can be sexually strong and dominate. These songs helped dictate the sexual liberation of the American woman. Songs covered are "Shave 'Em Dry" by Lucille Bogan, "Tell Mama" by Etta James, "One Night Stand" by Janis Joplin, and "Something to Talk About" by Bonnie Raitt. All songs can be located on the Rhapsody website.

Lucille Bogan's "Shave 'Em Dry" is considered to be the dirtiest song ever written. The song was recorded in 1935 and is said to have inspired lyrics to the song "Start me Up" by the legendary rock band the Rolling Stones. It is interesting to note that since 1985, song lyrics have been targeted for control and censorship to include a complete congressional hearing - started by the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) - to have records labeled in much the same way as movies have a rating guide. None of those songs that the PMRC referred to can compare to the raunchiness of "Shave 'Em Dry." Bogan sings with sass in traditional urban blues style belting out every word unabashedly candid. The words are frankly erotic with no misconstruing what is the underlying meaning is all about. There is no doubt that this tune shows a woman most comfortable in her skin and her sexuality.

While "Shave 'Em Dry" gets to the point and lays it out there for all to see, Etta James' "Tell Mama" attempts to be a little more subtle. Recorded in the late sixties, this song captures the essence of flirtatious sentiment. James' lets her man know that she will "make everything alright." The song's vivacious overtone along with James' earthy vocals adds to the mood of the lyrics. Just like Lucille Bogan, James positions herself as the master of her subject allowing the woman to be free in her decisions.

While the older blues women certainly supported the freedom of American women with their blues, Janis Joplin also brought the blues to the forefront during the late sixties. The Texas blues mama sang tough on her song "One Night Stand" when she directly professes "Don't you know that you're nothing more than a one night stand?" Janis and her song try to defy the social-psychological sexual idealism of traditional conservatism. No longer would a woman be confined to powers of a male-dominated world. "One Night Stand" defines something that "Shave 'Em Dry" and "Tell Mama" does not. The ultra feminist

song deliver a message of equal rights including the predominately male-natured thinking of love them and then leave them. However, it is just like the other two in that it proves how much female powerhouses' blues music connects with the ultimate image of the American woman.

With that said, modern-day Bonnie Raitt's song "Something to Talk About" - featured on her 1991 album Luck of the Draw - is mostly relaxed from the "in your face" directness of "Shave Em Dry" and "One Night Stand." The pop blues tune qualifies itself as blues with the other three considering its blues backbeat and Raitt's soulful gutsy voice. The notes are played in lower pitch which is traditional in blues music structure. This tune is predominately mild in comparison to the other three. However, she still takes a lead in affirmatively stating to her guy that they may as well pursue the relationship to greater heights of physical proportions.

With songs such as "Shave Em Dry" and "Tell Mama" coming out of a period when women were not perceived as equals, these performers showed everyone that those notions are pure nonsense. Any woman can rightfully be sexually provocative and should not have to suffer any societal indecencies wearing the infamous scarlet letter on her forehead.

The gutsy lowdown and unreserved feelings these songs possess beget the full potential of being an American woman. The quaint images of Victorian-era women are of by-gone days. American women gained their power to rival any man once the women's movement started. Perhaps these songs helped inspire the feminist drive. This blatant aggressiveness is what put the muscle in Rosie the Riveter. That chutzpa is what makes American women who they are today. These blues songs and others like them is all about what delineates the American woman well above any set standards for females.