

A Bad Woman Feeling Good



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An exciting lineage of women singers--originating with Ma Rainey and her protégé Bessie Smith--shaped the blues, launching it as a powerful, expressive vehicle of emotional liberation. Along with their successors Billie Holiday, Etta James, Aretha Franklin, Tina Turner, and Janis Joplin, they injected a dose of reality into the often trivial world of popular song, bringing their message of higher expectations and broader horizons to their audiences. These women passed their image, their rhythms, and their toughness on to the next generation of blues women, which has its contemporary incarnation in singers like Bonnie Raitt and Lucinda Williams (with whom the author has done an in-depth interview). Buzzy Jackson combines biography, an appreciation of music, and a sweeping view of American history to illuminate the pivotal role of blues women in a powerful musical tradition. Musician Thomas Dorsey said, "The blues is a good woman feeling bad." But these women show by their style that he had it backward: The blues is a bad woman feeling good.

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