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Fréhel and Bessie Smith: A Cross-Cultural Study of the French Realist Singer and the African American Classic Blues Singer

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Tiffany Renée Jackson, DMA

University of Connecticut, 2018

ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I explore parallels between the lives and careers of the *chanson réaliste* singer Fréhel (1891-1951), born Marguerite Boulc'h, and the classic blues singer Bessie Smith (1894-1937), and between the genres in which they worked. Both were tragic figures, whose struggles with love, abuse, and abandonment culminated in untimely ends that nevertheless did not overshadow their historical relevance. Drawing on literature in cultural studies and sociology that deals with feminism, race, and class, I compare the the two women's formative environments and their subsequent biographical histories, their career trajectories, the societal hierarchies from which they emerged, and, finally, their significance for developments in women's autonomy in wider society.

Chanson réaliste (realist song) was a French popular song category developed in the Parisian cabaret of the 1880s and which attained its peak of wide dissemination and popularity from the 1920s through the 1940s. It portrayed the harsh realities of life for the urban poor, including prostitution, teenage pregnancy, alcoholism, and violence; the genre was dominated by working-class female singers, who often had direct personal

Tiffany Renée Jackson, University of Connecticut, 2018

knowledge of such matters, doubly marginalized as they were by low class and gender status. I draw parallels between the *chanson réaliste* and the American genre of 'classic blues', which came to prominence in the 1920s, dealt with similar subject matter, and which was dominated by women performers -- in this case African American, and thus victims of racial as well as gender and class prejudice. The scholarly literature has hitherto been largely silent on such parallels.

The dissertation is in four chapters. Chapter One explores the background of Parisian music and culture in the so-called 'Belle Époque' of the years between 1871 and 1914, and the early life of Fréhel. Chapter Two traces the emergence of the classic blues and Bessie Smith's entry into its world. Chapter Three examines in detail the careers and performing styles of Fréhel and Smith, and the parallels between them. Chapter Four places these parallels in the broader context of the study of women in popular culture, and on the intersections of race and gender in this domain.

**Fréhel and Bessie Smith:
A Cross-Cultural Study of the French
Realist Singer and the African American Classic Blues Singer**

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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at the
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2018

APPROVAL PAGE

Doctor of Musical Arts

Fréhel and Bessie Smith: A Cross-Cultural Study of the French
Realist Singer and the African American Classic Blues Singer

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I would like to dedicate my achievement to my parents, Joseph Jackson Sr. and Bessie Jackson. Although a tragic occurrence ended my father's life just months before the completion of my dissertation, his spirit was with me daily. Lastly, it is because of my mother that I strive for excellence in all my endeavors. Her unconditional love has fueled my faith that all things are possible if you believe and work diligently. This, I know for sure. Words alone can not express my gratitude and admiration for you mom. I am reclaiming some of what was taken from you.

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CHAPTER I

THE BELLE ÉPOQUE AND BOHEMIAN CULTURE

.... Fréhel was the first French singer to sing the blues. Or, more accurately, a French version of the blues. Compared with the sublime laceration of 'Where are all my lovers?', closer in essence to Bessie Smith than Marie Dubas, the other voices of the time seem to deal more in bluettes than blues. Directly and without varnish, she sang of narcotic escape ('Cocaine'), lost illusions ('I don't expect anything any more'), and of the flesh that is for sale ('Under the black bridge' and its terrible 'Pssst! I'm fourteen years old'). Espousing an often brutal honesty, which the popular song would never find again, and that is all the more tragic because it carried for Fréhel the weight of lived experience."¹

The subject of my dissertation evolved while conducting research for my doctoral comprehensive examinations, on the development of the French *mélodie* during the Belle Époque. This drew my attention to the genre of French song known as *chanson réaliste* (realist song), a vehicle of satirical protest first popularized toward the end of the nineteenth century by Aristide Bruant, France's first realist singer, and reaching a peak of prominence during the first half of the twentieth century, particularly in the careers of Marguerite Boulc'h (1891-1951), known generally by her stage name of Fréhel, and later Edith Piaf (1915-1963). By the early twentieth century, female singers from poor backgrounds had come to dominate the genre. Marginalized both by their low class status and by their gender, such women were able to infuse their performances of chan-

¹ "La première chanteuse de blues française," *L'Express*, quoted at https://www.fremeaux.com/index.php?page=shop.product_details&category_id=74&flypage=shop.flypage&product_id=195&option=com_virtuemart: "Parce que Fréhel, c'était la première chanteuse de blues française. Ou, plus exactement, de blues à la française. A côté de cette sublime déchirure qu'est 'Où sont tous mes amants?', plus près, sur l'essentiel, de Bessie Smith que de Marie Dubas, les autres voix de l'époque faisaient plutôt dans la bluettes. Y allant sans détours et sans fard, elle chantait l'évasion narcotique ('La coco'), les illusions perdues ('Je n'attends plus rien') et la chair qui se vend ('Sous le pont noir' et son terrible « Pssst ! J'ai quatorze ans »). Parti pris d'honnêteté souvent brutale, que la chanson populaire ne retrouverait jamais, et qui est d'autant plus tragique qu'il portait, pour Fréhel, le poids du vécu." I have unfortunately been unable to identify the author or publication details of this quotation. It is cited on the website for an anthology of Fréhel recordings that was released in 1995 and will be discussed later in this study; it is apparently part of a review of the anthology that was published in the magazine *L'Express*. I have not been able to locate archive copies of this magazine.

sons réalistes with a profound pathos drawn from real-life experiences, and of a wider range of deprivations and indeed abuse than was typically known to their male peers.

Having had the opportunity at the University of Connecticut to direct discussion classes for a course on popular music and diversity in American society, I could not help but be struck by the parallel between these French singers and African American women of the same period who had emerged as the dominant interpreters of the genre known as classic blues. Remarkably, however, the quotation with which this chapter began is a rare example of such a connection being drawn. The careers of Fréhel and blues singer Bessie Smith (1894-1937) in particular seem to invite comparison. They are both viewed as tragic figures, who epitomized the image of what Kelley Conway, a historian of realist singers, refers to as a singer who has “lived” – who has experienced bitter struggles in love, abuse, and abandonment. Both met an untimely end, but this has not overshadowed their historical relevance. In researching the lives and careers of these two women, I was interested especially in the following questions:

- Was there a connection between the realist and classic blues singers and if so, what were the specific parallels?
- How did sociological conditions impact the careers of Fréhel and Bessie Smith?
- How might their paths have differed, as a woman of European descent and lower-class status on the one hand, and as a poor African American woman, descendant of slaves, on the other?
- Were chansons réalistes the “blues” according to French women and were Bessie Smith and Fréhel aware of one another?
- Could theoretical perspectives and sociological studies provide a means to build a bridge between the two genres?

It is my objective in this dissertation to compare and draw parallels between the environments in which Bessie Smith and Fréhel grew up, their biographical histories and

their career trajectories, the societal hierarchies from which they emerged, and their influence on the development of women's autonomy in wider society.

FRENCH SOCIETY AND SONG 1871-1914

During the second half of the nineteenth century, as the Civil War (1861-1865) and then Reconstruction (1865-1877) transformed the United States, France also went through a period of upheaval and rapid change. After the many decades of turbulence that followed the revolution of 1789, the country had enjoyed a period of relative stability and growing prosperity under the Emperor Napoleon III during the Second Empire (1852-1870). In 1870, however, France was provoked into declaring war on Prussia. The Franco-Prussian war was a devastating debacle for the French, ending the reign of Napoleon III, and taking a particular toll on Paris, where in the aftermath of the Prussian victory the bloody left-wing uprising of the Paris Commune was brutally suppressed by French troops.

Yet despite continuing divisions in French society, the ensuing Third Republic (1871-1940), and particularly what would come to be known as *La Belle Époque* (1871-1914), would prove to be a period of unprecedented creativity and progress for French society, with major developments in technology, science, and philosophy, as well as in the arts. Wealth and power were flaunted in areas as diverse as fine art, haute couture, cuisine, and automobiles, and at the broadest levels of national life:

The new age was bigger, brasher, harsher: it built larger and more complex structures of all kinds—taller monuments, faster-growing cities, more extensive networks of roads, railroads, larger armies, bigger bureaucracies, more highly organized political parties.²

² Jerrold E. Seigel, *Bohemian Paris : Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930*, Johns Hopkins paperback ed., (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 221.

There were enhancements in key sectors such as the educational system and mass transportation, and, along with the admission of the masses into public performance venues, such developments contributed to a greater degree of interaction between different social classes, and a growing resistance among the urban lower classes to accepting societal constraints.

The Belle Époque was also an era known for its musical innovations in song, both classical and popular. The French *mélodie*, originally derived from the eighteenth-century strophic *romance*, developed into an increasingly sophisticated genre of art song. A legion of literary innovators, most notably Baudelaire and Verlaine, helped to inspire the individual styles of leading French composers, including Fauré, Debussy, and Ravel. While the *mélodie* flourished in the relatively intimate environment of the salons of the social elites, the more democratic and commercial forum of the *café-concert* encouraged the emergence of new approaches to popular song. The *café-concert*, a relaxed environment which combined food, drink, and casual sociability with musical entertainment, emerged at the beginning of the eighteenth century. After waxing and waning through a variety of political upheavals and official restrictions, as those in power tried to rein in its perceived potential for fomenting political dissent, the *café-concert* reached a pinnacle during the Belle Époque. Unlike the elite salons, it offered a means for divergent social groups and classes to congregate and commingle. Even among the proliferating *café-concert* establishments, there was by the late nineteenth century a wide variety of choices for patrons, in terms of size, sophistication, and typical clientele. Elaborate theaters and cafés, such as the famous *Folies Bérgeres* (which is still in busi-

ness), could be found in the Champs-Élysées and neighboring districts; these attracted a more affluent audience, with impressive decor and an aura of grandeur. Many other establishments, however, both within more lugubrious areas of the city and especially in the *faubourgs* (suburbs), settled for simple decor and unsophisticated patrons:

Not all cafés-concerts possessed the excessive, outrageous decor of the Folies Bérgère. At the other end of the café-concert spectrum were the beuglants or bouibouis, cafés-concerts which tended to attract an exclusively working class or student clientele and which were lacking entirely in the glamour and comfort of palaces like the Eldorado and the Alcazar ... The beuglant, often associated with prostitution and a lack of hygiene, generally offered a modest performance space and a few singers, whose repertoires lagged behind those of the large cafés-concerts.³

In addition to poor and largely uneducated working-class patrons, the beuglants also began to attract an increasingly influential clientele of a different kind: the poor and politically disaffected individuals, often from middle-class, educated backgrounds, known as Bohemians. This group would go from frequenting the beuglants to performing themselves and setting up their own establishments, which would increasingly attract adventurous elite audiences interested in an 'edgier' experience than was offered at the grand theaters of the boulevards. It was in this setting that the *chanson réaliste* emerged as a distinct genre, even though its most celebrated performers, including Fréhel, would be women whose background was much closer to that of the original working-class beuglants.

In *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life*, Jerrod Seigel discusses the origins of this segment of Parisian society:

"By Bohemians," a stage figure of the 1840's declared, "I understand that class of individuals whose existence is a problem, social conditions a myth, fortune an enigma, who has no sta-

³ Kelley Conway, *The Chanteuse at the City Limits: Femininity, Paris, and the Cinema* (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1999), 54.

ble residence, no recognized retreat, who are located nowhere and whom one encounters everywhere who have no signal occupation and who exercise fits professions; of whom most get up in the morning without knowing where they will dine in the evening: rich today, famished tomorrow, ready to live honestly if they can and some other way if they can't." The nature of these Bohemians was less easy to specify than either Murger's or Balzac's. They might be unrecognized geniuses or confidence men. The designation "Bohemian" located them in a twilight zone between ingenuity and criminality.⁴

The term "Bohemian" emerged in France during the nineteenth century, stemming from the French word for what were then known as gypsies.⁵ The term is most often identified (though not exclusively) with artists, social misfits, and disaffected members of the bourgeoisie, who were in opposition to the social and political mainstream, and often defected to the faubourgs on the outskirts of Paris. A central figure in defining a particular brand of Bohemianism, and propelling it into mainstream consciousness, was Émile Goudeau (1849-1906), a literary force and former member of the bourgeois establishment. His philosophy was encapsulated in his novel *La cache enragée*, published in 1880. Along with Rudolph Salis he established *Le chat noir*, a cabaret located in Montmartre, which was representative of a "new" Bohemia, one which embraced the students, artists, and musicians alienated by failed social and political reforms, and anxious to emerge as individuals within a broader community of like-minded folk. The majority of bohemian artists began their careers as street performers and scavengers, but the appearance of cafés such as the *Le Chat Noir* provided alternatives. In this new culture, they could begin performing for arranged audiences comprised of the bourgeoisie and elites of French society. His model created a professional means by which Bohemian culture could thrive and appeal to upper-class patrons, even while they satirized them:

⁴ Jerrold, *Bohemian Paris*, 4.

⁵ Jerrold, *Bohemian Paris*, 5.

At the Chat Noir, the traditional blague of students and artists took on new forms: the staff of the cabaret was dressed in the green robes of the French Academy; as patrons arrived, they were greeted with exaggerated politeness, addressed with noble titles, and treated with extreme, caricatured respect.⁶

Another essential figure, whose performances laid the foundation for the all the realist singers who would follow him, was Aristide Bruant, who voluntarily escaped a life of bourgeois comfort at an early age. ⁷ In the 1880s he found his way to Montmartre, where he frequented the cafés and became known for his satirical and ‘realist’ songs, which most often mocked the bourgeoisie and elevated the cause of the common Parisian:

At his Montmartre cabarets, Bruant sang of ‘le peuple’ of Paris and its faubourgs with a mixture of irony and sincerity. He amused, offended and moved the largely bourgeois audiences with his slang-filled “Dans la rue” [In the Street], “Rose blanche” [White Rose] and “A Saint-Lazare” [At the Saint-Lazare (a prison)]. The realist song in its initial incarnation, then, combined the melancholy and sentimentality of the traditional chanson with Bruant’s attention to material conditions.⁸

“Le Chat Noir” ran advertisements to publicize concerts and to help promote known artists to the general public, but particularly the bourgeoisie; murals and other visual representations of the artists were placed strategically throughout the city and beyond to attract patrons. Bruant’s popularity and cultural relevance were reinforced by his con-

⁶ Jerrold, *Bohemian Paris*, 221.

⁷ Jerrold, *Bohemian Paris*, 230.

⁸ Conway, *The Chanteuse at the City Limits*, 14.

nection to famed artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, whose likeness of Bruant has been immortalized in French popular culture: ⁹

... the most famous images of Bruant, indeed of anyone connected with the Chat Noir, are those by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Lautrec's striking portrayal of Bruant, with his broad-brimmed black hat and flowering red scarf, remains familiar today.¹⁰

Although Bruant was known for crystallizing the *chanson réaliste* as a genre, it was the female singers who followed in his footsteps, initially Yvette Guilbert and Eugénie Buffet, and then above all their younger contemporary Fréhel, who would take the genre to the center of mainstream French popular culture, and indeed become its sole proprietors -- in the same way that African American women would do with the classic blues in the 1920s. The songs were written by men, but the 'lived' experiences of these women gave the subject matter an unparalleled authenticity and emotional impact.¹¹ Kelley Conway writes of the 'singer who has lived':

She was "authentic," that is, she had "**lived**" these songs, had known poverty and prostitution herself; and she was an "artist" who created these characters using her performance skills as well as her skills as an observer of human misery.¹²

For these women, it was not merely satire or chiding the privileged, but a means of making a living and living the life of the song. They were the protagonist and antagonist, they were the narrator and the subject, and both victims and heroines.

⁹ Jerrold, *Bohemian Paris*, 230.

¹⁰ Jerrold, *Bohemian Paris*, 230.

¹¹ Conway, *The Chanteuse at the City Limit*, 14.

¹² Conway, *The Chanteuse at the City Limit*, 15.

MARGUERITE BOULC'H

The first cries of the little Marguerite were answered by the blare of holiday celebrations. In a way, the one who would become the Kid Pervenche then Fréhel was already in the street, offered up to her.¹³

Fréhel (1891-1951) was born Marguerite Boulc'h, on the eve of the July 14 holiday. Her life and times are most fully documented in Alain and Nicole Lacombe's landmark biography, titled simply *Fréhel*, published in 1985. Lacombe's book, available only in French, is one of a small number of scholarly publications dedicated to Fréhel. Much of the key biographical information in Lacombe's book is drawn from a series of interviews which the singer gave in the 1930s, and which were published in *Points de Vue - Images du monde* (1937).¹⁴ Lacombe documents Fréhel's life from infancy to death, and presents a detailed account of Fréhel's evolution from a street performer to the concert hall. The other most substantial source on the singer is Audrey Coudevylle-Vue's dissertation entitled, "Fréhel et Yvonne George, Muses Contrastées de la Chanson 'Réaliste' de L'entre-deux-guerres", which was published in 2016. Coudevylle-Vue compares the lives and careers of two women who were prominent in the same era but who presented vastly different personas and performance styles, with George appealing most strongly to the avant-garde and intelligentsia of the day, rather than Fréhel's more broadly based audience.

¹³ Nicole Lacombe and Alain Lacombe, *Fréhel*. (Paris: Edition Belfond, 1989), 11: "Aux premiers vagissements de la petite Marguerite répondirent les flonflons de la fête. D'une certaine manière, celle qui deviendrait la Môme Pervenche puis Fréhel était déjà dans la rue, offerte à elle."

¹⁴ Lacombe, *Fréhel*, 12.

Other sources include blogs and websites that provide information on Fréhel's many recordings, along with brief descriptions of her professional achievements and influences. The most significant of these is offered by Frémeaux and Associates, a web-based company that produces recording projects and provides commentary on artists of prior generations. After I contacted the company via email, they sent me a link to a compilation of Fréhel's recordings from her most prolific years (1930-1939), which have been remastered and edited, and are available for purchase. Included with the recording is a booklet written by Eric Remy, which includes a comprehensive overview of Fréhel's life and historical context that goes beyond the myths and rumors often recirculated in this kind of commentary.

Fréhel was born in 1891 in Paris to Breton (Brittany, northwestern region of France) parents during the height of the Belle Époque. Ives and Marie-Jeanne Boulc'h, Fréhel's parents, provided little stability during her youth as it was their desire to disassociate themselves from the burden of possessing a child (Fréhel faced a similar reality during her first marriage). Fréhel and innumerable French children born during the nineteenth century were mothered by women fraught by social stigmas attached to maternity and domesticity. Pregnant lower-class women were viewed as a malignant cancer, who after struggling through labor continued to be burdened by the very existence of their children.¹⁵

In an effort to make a living Marie-Jeanne chose to reside in Paris to labor for an elite Parisian man, and Ives, who was a mariner, did not play a significant role in the life

¹⁵ Lacombe, *Fréhel*, 12

of his child. The absence of Fréhel's father was exacerbated by the fact that her parents led separate lives,¹⁶ therefore by the age of five years old, the harsh repercussions of abandonment and desperation were already a reality. Marie-Jeanne primed her prepubescent daughter to sing and perform for local cafés by having her stand on tables to solicit donations from passers by in pursuit of generating sustenance. The lure of performance life had become a condition of survival for the young Fréhel, who understood very early in her life that without such a means of supporting herself she would continue to suffer an existence of chronic deprivation. This state of desperation loomed over her adolescence, which she later characterized in the following statement: "I had known abandonment, blows, the hard life, but I had always eaten."¹⁷ Undoubtedly, this is a precise representation of a lifelong mindset that reflected an indestructible force and determination. It is indicative not only of an obstinate resolve, but of an attitude which would drive Fréhel's career and, essentially, would force her to change her persona. But harrowing tribulations encountered during her youth, and the abandonment of her father during infancy and adolescence, may have fostered an inability to maintain healthy and lasting relationships with men during her adult years.

The pervasive culture of prostitution in Paris shadowed Fréhel's upbringing, as her mother would often invite unsavory characters to her lodgings during her husband's absence. To elicit privacy, Fréhel was required to run errands in the late evenings, where she frequented salacious environments popular with thieves and prostitutes. During one particular excursion, an older man tried to abduct her; she survived the attack,

¹⁶ Lacombe, *Fréhel*, 11.

¹⁷ Lacombe, *Fréhel*, 20: "J'avais connue l'abandon, les coups, la vie dure, mais j'avais toujours eu à manger."

but the intense fear she experienced would alter her mind indefinitely. Instead of comforting her daughter, Marie-Jeanne was adversarial and demanded she never tell her father or else she would suffer worse consequences. These occurrences carried a tremendous weight and occupied Fréhel's consciousness as she transitioned from childhood to adolescence. Lessons in survival would become a daily phenomenon, and she came to think it useless to harbor animosity towards those who victimized her. In an unlikely moment of reciprocity, the old man who attempted to rob her of her innocence was shot to death.

At the age of seven, she survived the first attempted rape in an open field. A nasty old man. She would never hold a grudge against him: men are like that! In any case a short time later, the old man died of a stray bullet intended for a burglar on the run and the field where he had attempted to take little Margaret's virtue would remain always unsellable, as if cursed. Fréhel would always see in that a sign of Destiny.¹⁸

This left a deep impression on Fréhel. Regardless of hardships, she refused to harbor grudges or nurture animosity towards adversaries. She opted to channel her life's experiences into her music, instead of being a victim of circumstances. Fréhel believed that fate would ultimately have the final say.

FRÉHEL

Fréhel's performance life began before she was five years old, but despite the years she spent as a street performer, exposure to professional theaters did not come for some time. In 1906, at the age of fifteen, while traveling as a sales technician for a cosmetic company, she encountered a prominent Spanish courtesan, La Belle Otéro,

¹⁸Eric Remy, Liner notes to 2-CD set *Fréhel: Anthologie 1930-1939*, Fremeaux & Associates, FA 165, 1995:

“A sept ans elle subit une première tentative de viol sur terrain vague. Un vieux vicieux. Elle ne lui en voudra jamais : les hommes sont comme ça! D'ailleurs à quelque temps de là, le vieux meurt d'une balle perdue destinée à un cambrioleur en cavale et le champ où il avait attenté à la vertu de la petite Marguerite restera toujours invendable, comme maudit. Fréhel y verra toujours un signe du Destin.”

who would immediately become an inspiration for Fréhel's career during her post-adolescent years. Her preoccupation with the world of the "grandes horizontales" brought her to this moment in time that would mark the beginning of a new life. Fréhel was aware of La Belle Otéro's high status amongst the other courtesans of her era, and greatly admired her for the riches she generated:

[Fréhel] looked with great respect at the high-class prostitutes, these splendid courtesans, high-flying madams, these feathered tarts whose grand caprices and small talents fill the gazettes: Cléo do Merode, Lina Cavalieri, Liane de Pougy, Emilienne d'Alençon, Margerethe von Belle, known as Mata Hari (Daughter of the dawn) and, of course, the greediest of the lionesses: Caroline Otéro, known as "La Belle Otéro". Pervenche owed it to herself to meet Otéro and in her arena.¹⁹

This chance encounter compelled Fréhel to sing a private audition for her idol, which would propel her into a world of social and professional uplift: "Fréhel knew that through this woman she could enter a different world."²⁰ Whisked into a world of lasciviousness and overindulgence, she witnessed a woman possessed with absolute control over her private environment, most often inhabited by rich and powerful figures. Conversely, in Fréhel's world, a woman's existence centered on acquiescence to male dominance and deference within a patriarchal society. In the case of her mother, the burden of a child and abandonment of a husband was what she knew. In the courtesan's world, her presence was the preeminent force over those who were chosen to thrive within the circle.

Fréhel envisioned the courtesan as the quintessential image of what she could be in her

¹⁹Remy, *Fréhel: Anthologie 1930-1939*. : "Son regard se porte d'emblée vers les "grandes horizontales", ces splendides courtisanes, ces hétaires de haute volée, ces cocottes empanachées dont les grands caprices et les petits talents emplissent les gazettes: Cléo de Mérode, Lina Cavalieri, Liane de Pougy, Emilienne d'Alençon, Margarethe von Zelle dite Mata Hari (Fille de l'aube) et bien sûr, la plus gourmande de ces lionnes : Caroline Otéro, dite "La Belle Otéro". Pervenche se devait de la rencontrer et dans son cadre."

²⁰ Lacombe, *Fréhel*, 26-27: "Fréhel savait que par cette femme elle pourrait approcher un autre monde.

future, which would impact the new professional persona, in terms of presentation and costume, that she adopted in 1908, as 'La Môme Pervenche' (the Pervenche Kid). The accoutrements afforded by the courtesan were no longer an unattainable fantasy, but an achievable reality.

The two women would find themselves as the same person. Without it ever having been said or confessed, La Belle Otéro will have marked Fréhel's life: a sober premonition that the singer would assume thereafter, an omen that she lived in the moment like a wonder, a perplexity and greed that nothing could satiate.²¹

Fréhel's personal life evolved in the midst of a burgeoning career from the streets and cafés to concert halls. During the course of her life, she married twice, the first time to Robert Holland when she was fifteen years old,²² an event that resulted in the birth and premature death of her first and only child. Holland recognized Fréhel's potential and need for stability from the outset of their acquaintance, and it was he who suggested yet another new name for the singer in 1910, the one under which she would achieve enormous success.

He also found for her definitive stage name. He had the idea of this simple word: Fréhel. Evocation of Cape Fréhel, a place that the singer often spoke about with a tender nostalgia in her voice.²³

Although Fréhel adored the attention and stability Holland offered in the early stages of their relationship, it did not last. The fantasy was short-lived. A few months after their

²¹ Lacombe, *Fréhel*, 29: "Deux femmes qui se retrouveront dans le même caractère entier. Sans que cela soit jamais dit ou avoué, la Belle Otéro aura marqué la vie de Fréhel; une sobre prémonition que la chanteuse assumera par la suite, un présage qu'elle vivait dans l'instant comme un émerveillement, une perplexité et une gourmandise que rien de pouvait assouvir. "

²² Audrey Coudeville-Vue, "*Fréhel et Yvonne George, Muses contrastées de la chanson <<Réaliste>> de l'entre-deux-guerres*" (PhD diss., Université de Valenciennes Université Lille Nord de France, 2016), 9.

²³ Lacombe, *Fréhel*, 44: "Il trouva aussi pour elle son nom de scène définitif. Il eut l'idée de ce simple mot: Fréhel. Évocation directe du Cap Fréhel, site dont la chanteuse parlait souvent avec une tendre nostalgie dans la voix."

marriage an unexpected pregnancy occurred, and Fréhel gave birth to a baby son. She soon relinquished care of the child to a nanny, fearful of jeopardizing her career and ultimately falling prey to the stigmatization of domesticity in French society. The burden of a child would redefine her social status in society and threaten the freedom she desperately yearned to acquire, like La Belle Otero. In any case, the child did not live long. Audrey Coudeville-Vue writes:

About the child, a son, Fréhel said nothing beyond the fact that he died of hunger, poorly cared for by the nurse to whom the couple had entrusted him. This highly tragic subject - the loss of a child - which could have fueled her realistic repertoire, did not appear in any of the titles Fréhel recorded during her career.²⁴

The speculation surrounding the death of her son would haunt Fréhel until the end of her life. After years of denying rumors of a child and keeping the truth from friends and acquaintances, she finally made a rare admission of the truth during an interview: “We had fallen on hard times that caused him to die of hunger.”²⁵ Lacombe notes that it was not surprising or unusual for a child to succumb to premature death due to the high rate of infant mortality, but the question remains, how did this event affect Fréhel’s psyche? Dire ramifications of the denial of her son’s existence persisted, especially during the later years. Bouts of mental pain were masked by substance abuse, as she struggled with thoughts of what the life of a child could have meant for her own survival and what he could have become.

When the singer would talk about her sorrows, her sorrows which, little by little, pushed her to cross to the other side of the mirror, one would find again an unfathomable pas-

²⁴ Coudeville-Vue, “Fréhel et Yvonne George”, 19: “De ce nourrisson, un fils, Fréhel ne raconta rien, si ce n’est qu’il mourut de faim, mal soigné par la nourrice à qui le couple l’avait confié. Ce sujet hautement tragique – la perte d’un enfant – qui aurait pu alimenter son répertoire réaliste, n’apparut dans aucun titre enregistré de Fréhel durant sa carrière.”

²⁵ Lacombe, *Fréhel*, 42: “Nous étions tombés sur des misérables qui l’ont laissé mourir de faim”.

sion, this childhood full of disappointments and the shame of being weakened by this heir she did not have time to love, this extension of herself can not even assimilate to her own image.²⁶

It is likely that Fréhel construed the memory of her son as a dormant part of herself or as a love that was not allowed to manifest.

Later, and even at the end of her life, Fréhel would recall this lack, the child, which she had not known, or hardly, and whose absence would become stronger over the years.²⁷

Fréhel may have sensed the loss of her son as a curse against her own mortality, and though ultimately the memory might have saved her, instead she sought to erase it altogether. The erasure of her son's memory was an omen, an albatross that functioned as a psychological weight, but it was masked by a new persona: Fréhel, the quintessential realist singer known for injecting real emotions into her songs, laden with flaws and inconsistencies of a woman who has lived. Lacombe writes that:

Fréhel never wanted to be an artist in the traditional sense of the word: one whose secret ambition is to maintain between her and the public the distance of admiration and envy. Fréhel needed to be part of her audience, to absorb its accent, its rumors, its cries. And instead of an ordinary succession of songs, one following straight on another, she began another dialogue with her listeners, knowing how to place silences, letting loose curses with an already remarkable facility.²⁸

²⁶ Lacombe, *Fréhel*, 43: "Quand la chanteuse parlera de ses chagrins, de ses peines qui, peu à peu, l'ont poussée à passer de l'autre côté du miroir, on retrouvera une insondable passion amoureuse, cette enfance pleine de déceptions et la honte d'avoir été fragilisée par cet héritier qu'elle n'a pas eu le temps d'aimer, ce prolongement d'elle-même ne pourra même pas assimiler à sa propre image."

²⁷ Lacombe, *Fréhel*, 43: "Plus tard, et même à la fin de sa vie, Fréhel évoquera ce manque, cet enfant qu'elle n'a pas connu ou presque et dont l'absence se fortifiera au fil des années."

²⁸ Lacombe, *Fréhel*, 45: "Fréhel n'a jamais voulu être une artiste au sens traditionnel du terme. Celle dont l'ambition secrète est de maintenir entre elle et le public la distance de l'admiration et de l'envie. Fréhel avait besoin de faire partie de son public, de s'imprégner de son accent, des ses rumeurs, de ses cris. Et au lieu d'un tour de chant ordinaire, enchaînant chanson sur chanson, elle entamait un autre dialogue avec ses auditeurs, sachant installer des silences, lâchant des imprécations avec une facilité déjà remarquable."

As her marriage to Holland began to dissolve, Fréhel made the acquaintance of Maurice Chevalier, singer, dancer, and well-respected Parisian impresario, for whom she developed a great admiration and obsession. Struggles with drug dependency plagued her relationship with Maurice, but the attraction of the glitz and glamour present in the cafes of Montmartre, where one was known to catch sightings of prominent aristocratic figures, was irresistible. Fréhel was uninhibited and not afraid to spark interactions with distinguished members of the audience. One such reported encounter involved an exchange with a queen, who flauntingly sported an array of precious jewels. The queen replied, "When you are my age, perhaps you could own some". Fréhel retorted, "You're right, I'm not ugly enough yet to have jewels."²⁹ This account is a testament of Fréhel's lack of fear in the presence of privilege, and the gall of someone such as herself, born into a lower class family, showing such little deference towards royalty.

Fréhel began slipping deeper into obsessive thoughts of losing Chevalier and suicidal fantasies.³⁰ There were rumors of improprieties by both parties, and eventually Chevalier was led to abandon the relationship for another distinguished artist, Mistinguett, a chanteuse and nemesis of Fréhel's. To cope, Fréhel resorted to old vices and debauchery.

The helpless one did not try to understand. The fact was there, unavoidable, and a quasi-surgical solution was needed. The pride of her despair first pushed her to consider suicide. But why disappear when one has

²⁹ Lacombe, *Fréhel*, 77: "Tu as raison, je ne suis pas encore assez moche pour avoir des bijoux."

³⁰ Lacombe, *Fréhel*, 77-79.

made so much effort to exist, to impose oneself, to believe in feelings that one has quickly turned into illusions? ³¹

The cause of her despair was not absent from her performances, but subsumed into them, generating a manner which caused Fréhel to stand apart from her contemporaries, to become the subject of her songs:

From there, Fréhel embarked on a vengeful crusade of which we will never know who the designated victim was: the singer and her suicidal thoughts, the whimsical singer who could be punished for her desires for freedom, or Mistinguett the intruder.³²

This sort of raw emotional realism was the antithesis of sentimentality. It was an unabashed and visceral outpouring on display for all to witness. For Fréhel, the realist song was a means to exorcise her pains: “She did not hold on long to her sorrow: Fréhel would even make it a showpiece”.³³

In an attempt to escape the specter of Chevalier, she accepted an invitation from the Grand Duchess of Russia to leave Paris in search of a respite. This turned into a decade-long retreat from her life in France. Unfortunately, during her long sojourn in Russia, she developed a cocaine habit more excessive than her past usage.³⁴ After ten years of solitude, excess, and nostalgia, she returned to Paris hardly recognizable, carrying a frumpier physique and worn façade. Parisians received Fréhel once again in

³¹ Lacombe, *Fréhel*, 79: “La délaissé ne chercha pas à comprendre. Le fait était là, incontournable, et une solution quasi chirurgicale s’imposait. La fierté de son désespoir la poussa d’abord à envisager le suicide. Mais pourquoi disparaître alors que l’on a fait autant d’efforts pour exister, pour s’imposer, pour croire à des sentiments que l’on a vite transformés en chimères?”

³² Lacombe, *Fréhel*, 79: “A partir de là, Fréhel se lança dans une croisade vengeresse dont on ne saura jamais quelle était la victime désignée: la chanteuse et ses idées suicidaires, le chanteur fantaisiste qui pouvait être puni pour ses envies de liberté, ou encore Mistinguett l’intruse.”

³³ Lacombe, *Fréhel*, 81: “Elle ne gardait pas longtemps son chagrin. Fréhel en ferait même un élément de spectacle.”

³⁴ Eric Remy, *Fréhel: Anthologie 1930-1939*.

1923, after having forgotten the artist she was and embraced the one she had become, “Inoubliable inoubliée.” She went on to make numerous recordings, and appeared in many films. In 1951, at the age of 59, she died destitute in a murky motel in Paris, surrounded by the lives of those with whom she was most familiar: prostitutes, addicts, and street urchins.

CHAPTER II

POSTBELLUM AMERICA AND THE ORIGINS OF THE BLUES

The Belle Époque was a time of political, social, and cultural transformation for the inhabitants of France. Contemporaneously, the United States was dealing with the aftermath of the civil war and moving away from what had for long defined the nation, the institution of slavery. The American civil war (1861-1865) resulted in the dissolution of legalized servitude, sealed into the American constitution by the resolution of the Thirteenth Amendment. In the years to follow, the era known as Reconstruction, the nation attempted to reunite the states, rebuild the republic and erect a system whereby people of African descent could for the first time have the opportunity for upward mobility, citizenship and the freedom to migrate if they wished in search of a dignified existence. Many newly freed Africans migrated to northern locales in search of labor and a safe space to grow families; many ventured to metropolitan areas such as Chicago and Harlem to partake in a thriving industrial economy.

In postbellum America, African and European cultural practices commingled and brought about the preeminence of the blues. Even before the abolition of slavery, however, there had been crosscurrents of influence. By the 1840s and 1850s, America’s

earliest form of widely popular entertainment, the minstrel show, was at the height of its popularity. Minstrelsy involved white male performers in “black face”, who made up with burnt-cork grease for the purpose of portraying stereotypes representative of the “negro”.³⁵ One such stereotype is embodied in “Mammy”, a larger, dark-skinned maternal character who sparked nostalgia in the hearts of many white people, who were often reared by such women. Al Jolson, one of America’s top minstrel performers in the early twentieth century, sings a song entitled “Mammy” in the movie, *The Jazz Singer* (1927). The popularization of minstrelsy was indicative of an era when African Americans were viewed and stereotyped as “bestial” and “childlike”;³⁶ after the emancipation, however, they begin to form professional traveling troupes of their own, presenting a genre of variety show, comprising dancers, singers, jugglers, comedians and singers, that came to be known as vaudeville. Historian of African-American music, Amiri Baraka writes:

It goes without saying that the black minstrels were “more authentic,” and the black shows, although they did originate from white burlesque of Negro mores, were given a vitality and solid humor that the earlier shows never had.³⁷

In opposition to white minstrels, vaudevillians focused on professionalism³⁸ by honing their skills and profiling individuals who exemplified unique abilities. Women singers in particular were able to sharpen their talents on the vaudevillian circuit before embarking upon distinguished solo careers:

³⁵ Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. (Harper Perennial, 2002), 83.

³⁶ Baraka, *Blues People*, 83.

³⁷ Baraka, *Blues People*, 85.

³⁸ Baraka, *Blues People*, 82.

Minstrelsy and vaudeville not only provided employment for a great many women blues singers but helped to develop the concept of professionalism for the Negro female entertainer.³⁹

Slavery resulted not solely in the transport of African peoples, but the transference of their cultural practices and customs, many of which were not allowed to flourish in America. Baraka notes that:

....references to the gods or religions of Africa were suppressed by the white masters as soon as they realized what these were—not only because they naturally thought of African religious customs as “barbarous” but because the whites soon learned that too constant evocation of the African gods could mean that those particular Africans were planning on leaving that plantation as soon as they could! The use of the African drums was soon prevented too, as the white man learned that drums could be used to incite revolt as well as to accompany dancers.⁴⁰

Certain customs persisted, such as communal singing, call and response exchanges, work songs, field hollers, and various other vocal expressions laden with hidden meanings. From these varied sources, the blues and derivatives of the blues began to emerge. Blues is a post-emancipation rhetorical expression birthed through the experiences of the descendants of slavery. In its rawest form, it began as a vocal verse form predominantly performed by African American men,⁴¹ whose singing modes can be classified as “howling”, “moaning” or “crying”. But while the sound of the blues was of course a crucial element in its appeal, its historical significance went far beyond that. The blues provided a means to express sentiments that emanated directly from the sociological conditions of African American people postbellum, rather than being filtered through the perspectives of white male consciousness: “Blues means Negro experi-

³⁹ Baraka, *Blues People*, 93.

⁴⁰ Baraka, *Blues People*, 19.

⁴¹ Baraka, *Blues People*, 91.

ence, it is the one music the Negro made that could not be transferred into a more general significance than the one the Negro gave it initially.”⁴² Such figures as Blind Lemon Jefferson and Robert Johnson are known today as major practitioners of the original ‘folk’ or ‘country’ blues, but they, and the genre itself, did not receive recognition until record companies became interested in it in the mid-1920s. Before this, musicians such as Jefferson and Johnson spent the majority of their lives traveling in search of dives and juke joints to peddle their rare talents. Many blues men did not begin recording until a short time before their deaths, and if it had not been for their recording efforts, many would have died and remained in near obscurity.

THE CLASSIC BLUES

By the time the country blues came to be recorded, audiences and record buyers were already becoming familiar with a rather different and more professionalized genre, the classic blues, which was instead dominated by female singers.

An external and sophisticated idea of performance had come to the blues, moving it past the casualness of the “folk” to the conditioned emotional gesture of the “public”.⁴³

Classic blues reflected changes in social conditions since the Civil War. The sense that new possibilities were becoming available began to disseminate throughout African American communities during Reconstruction, but not without encountering the looming ghost of racial disparities stemming from decades of bondage. A black middle class began to emerge, composed of professionals of various kinds. Many sharpened their

⁴² Baraka, *Blues People*, 94.

⁴³ Baraka, *Blues People*, 82.

singing, dancing, and performance skills with the hope of landing work with a traveling troupe or local theater. Traveling theater troupes began to form, and some adventurous women were able to emerge from their typical roles as domestic servants and care-taking church women in search of independence.

What happened to the blues to make it “classic” and how was this genre different from country blues? In this section, it is important to differentiate the two -- musically, socially, and culturally. In his critically acclaimed 1963 book, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, Amiri Baraka documents a comprehensive social history of African Americans from slavery to the end of World War II through the evolution of the blues, with the hope of unveiling the trajectory of the “Negro” towards finding a place within America’s superstructure. Baraka argues that the classic blues “represented the Negro’s entrance into the world of professional entertainment and the assumption of the psychological imperatives that must accompany such a phenomenon.”⁴⁴ The classic blues emerged during the “roaring twenties” after World War I, when in Paris “negromania” was all the rage. It is known as an instrumental form of the blues, incorporating a more ‘European’ approach to structure and instrumental accompaniment than the country blues. In addition, the classic blues was influenced by earlier forms of popular American music, where artists such as Bessie Smith honed their performance skills:

Musically, classic blues showed the Negro singers’ appropriation of a great many elements of popular American music, notably the music associated with popular theater or vaudeville.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Baraka, *Blues People*, 82.

⁴⁵ Baraka, *Blues People*, 81.

Conversely, the country blues was a vocal form of music that was generally performed a cappella or accompanied by a homemade acoustic stringed instrument.

One of the key differences between country blues and the classic blues is the latter represented a culture of professionalism that had not existed prior to its emergence.⁴⁶ It was no longer a sociological ideology rooted in the African American experience prior to the Civil War, but one which emerged through the consciousness of a free people. According to Baraka:

.....classic blues took on a certain degree of professionalism. It was no longer strictly the group singing to ease their labors or the causal expression of personal deliberations on the world. It became a music that could be used to entertain others formally.⁴⁷

Originally, the personal cultural perspectives of the blues were known only within African American social milieus, but the classic blues appealed to the sensibilities of all mankind on subjects of love, pain, and sexual prowess, thereby creating a means for African Americans, and particularly women, to make a living as artists. Narratives were no longer introverted expressions shared only amongst one's own group, but more universal stories accessible to the general public.

Blues was a music that arose from the needs of a group, although it was assumed that each man had his own blues and that he would sing them. As such, the music was private and personal, although the wandering country blues singers of earlier times had from time to time casual audiences who would sometimes respond with gifts of food, clothes, or even money. But again, it was assumed that anybody could sing the blues.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Baraka, *Blues People*, 82.

⁴⁷ Baraka, *Blues People*, 82.

⁴⁸ Baraka, *Blues People*, 82.

Baraka contrasts this early history of the blues with the later developments of the classic genre:

The lyrics of the classic blues come concerned with situations and ideas that are recognizable as having issued from one area of a much larger human concern. Classic blues is less obscure to White America for these reasons, less involuted, and certainly less precise.⁴⁹

While the inception of the blues in the late nineteenth century had been driven primarily by men, early in the twentieth century African American women redefined certain performance practices that are now memorialized in their prolific discographies. According to Baraka, a number of factors contributed to the rise of women as the primary purveyors of the classic blues, including the broader movement across American society for women's rights (including suffrage), and the rise of a professional African-American entertainment circuit. Above all, however, was the fact that the entertainment business offered the only real possibility for independence to a class of women who, after the promise of Reconstruction faded, were largely limited to domestic service or prostitution as means of making a living, and (if 'respectably' employed), to the church as a source of social status.⁵⁰ Prostitution was a scourge that hovered over the lives of poor women worldwide, as has already been noted in the case of French society. The women of the classic blues emerged from the kitchen, the church and the streets in search of socioeconomic autonomy.

⁴⁹ Baraka, *Blues People*, 86.

⁵⁰ Baraka, *Blues People*, 91.

BESSIE SMITH, “THE EMPRESS OF THE BLUES”

Over the years, much has been written about Bessie’s personality. Early writers tended to stereotype her as a big fat mama who drank a lot, fought like a dog, and sang like an angel. Perhaps because there is a tendency to judge her by her many recordings, one is sometimes left with the impression that Bessie’s only redeeming quality was her glorious voice.⁵¹

Historically, the reception of Bessie Smith has been dominated by the following perspectives: her boss-like personality, the rough character of her singing voice, her sexuality and myths of how she died. Chris Albertson’s biography, *Bessie: The Empress of the Blues*, is one of the most important sources on her life because it is based on interviews Albertson conducted with a close living relative, Maud, before the book was published in 1972.⁵²

Bessie Smith was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee. The exact date of her birth is not clear, as was the case with many African Americans at the turn of the nineteenth century. As Albertson explains:

It was a time when South Bureaucracy made little distinction between its black population and its dogs, so official records, such as birth certificate, were not always deemed necessary.⁵³

Albertson suggests that the most likely date is April 15, 1894, which was notated on her marriage certificate in 1923.⁵⁴ By age nine, Bessie was forced to tolerate an older sister, Viola, to care for her and younger siblings after the death of both parents.⁵⁵ Bessie greatly admired her brothers Andrew and Clarence, who were both performers in their

⁵¹ Chris Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2003), 55.

⁵² Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 1.

⁵³ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 7.

⁵⁴ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 7.

⁵⁵ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 8.

own right. Clarence would remain her closest sibling and primary inspiration for the duration of her life. “Bessie seemed mesmerized by her older brother—it was clear that she, too, was priming herself for bigger things.”⁵⁶

Between the years 1910-1911, a traveling troupe of vaudevillian performers arrived in Chattanooga. Vaudeville was central to the early development of the careers of most African American entertainers.

By the turn of the century there were hundreds of tiny colored troupes, and some larger ones like The Rabbit Foot, Silas Green’s, Mahara’s. There were medicine shows, vaudevilles, and circuses when minstrel shows finally died.⁵⁷

Vaudeville was a variety show that emerged in the decades preceding the great era of the classic blues in the 1920s. It was packed with variety acts, including dancers, singers, actors, jugglers, comedians, and performers of all sorts. It was based on older performance practices rooted in minstrelsy, and became a training ground for solo acts. This new culture represented the future of the “negro”, who continued to endure immense challenges fifty years or so after the Emancipation Proclamation. Aware of the growing national interest in black culture, reflected in the craze even among white people for ragtime music and dances such as the cakewalk, many African Americans began sharpening their performance skills. Some were originally street performers who then went on to establish professional relationships with traveling theater troupes.

Bessie and Clarence Smith were drawn in by the allure of the traveling troupe performing in Chattanooga. Clarence auditioned and was offered a place in the troupe;

⁵⁶ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 8.

⁵⁷ Baraka, *Blues People*, 89.

despite the harm his absence would cause his sister, he took up the position, though he departed inconspicuously because he knew it would not be received well. As expected, Bessie was devastated, because although she was believed to be adequately prepared, she was too young to leave home.⁵⁸ It was during Clarence's absence that Viola began abusing Bessie, sometimes locking her in an outhouse all night long as punishment.⁵⁹ In an interview in 1972, Clarence's wife Maud recalled, "Bessie used to tell people that she 'was raised in a shit house'."⁶⁰ When Clarence returned to Chattanooga in 1912, his family was able to live in better housing, and after Bessie's successful audition for the troupe with which her brother traveled, she began her professional career.

The same year of Bessie's departure, she made the acquaintance of Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, a singer respectfully known as "The Mother of the Blues". Ma Rainey is widely credited with creating the classic blues style.

She was one of the most imitated and influential classical blues singers, and perhaps the one who can be called the link between the earlier, less polished blues styles to the smoother theatrical styles of most of the later urban blues singers.⁶¹

Ma Rainey was born in 1886, almost a decade before Bessie Smith, in Columbus, Georgia. In bridging the gap between country blues and classic blues, she introduced a smoother, more impassioned vocal delivery.⁶² Bessie first met Ma Rainey in 1912 when

⁵⁸ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 11.

⁵⁹ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 11.

⁶⁰ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 11.

⁶¹ Baraka, *Blues People*, 89.

⁶² Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 12

she joined the Moses Stokes company.⁶³ There are conflicting accounts of the exact impact Ma Rainey had on Bessie's career, and countless myths about the nature of their relationship. It is true that when Bessie joined the Stokes company, Ma Rainey and her husband were current members; however according to Maud Smith, Bessie was already a developed singer before she left Chattanooga. Exaggerated accounts of Ma Rainey's influence have been countered by scholars and artists who witnessed Bessie in the theater first hand. One such artist was Thomas Dorsey, Ma Rainey's accompanist.

Thomas A. Dorsey, who sold soft drinks in the aisles of the "81" before becoming "Ma" Rainey's accompanist, witnessed Bessie's rise and shared some of his earliest recollections in a 1971 interview: "It was about 1913 or 1914 and Bessie was already a star in her own right, but she really got her start there in '81'—I believe that's really where she made it—and I don't recall Ma Rainey ever having taken credit for helping her".⁶⁴

In another instance, he claims that Ma Rainey mentored the younger woman, but that Bessie was "the ma of all of 'em."⁶⁵ According to Albertson, Bessie was not a loyal member of the Stokes company, as she went out searching for opportunities wherever she could land a gig.

Prior to World War I, Bessie had not yet attained the level of success that she would later enjoy, but her momentum began to build as a member of the Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBA), the organization that ran the African American vaudeville circuit. Theater "81" in Atlanta, one of the most prestigious venues associated with TOBA,⁶⁶ served as a makeshift home for Bessie, where she ventured outside the per-

⁶³ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 13.

⁶⁴ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 15.

⁶⁵ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 15.

⁶⁶ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 14.

formance role to train future chorus members, while simultaneously sharpening her own abilities. After the war Bessie's career continued to burgeon, and by around 1922 she had come to develop a substantial following in the South and along the east coast.⁶⁷ The country was moving away in many ways from its Victorian affinities, and this undoubtedly created a more fruitful environment for many artists formerly on the margins, for reasons of race, gender, or other issues:

As America experienced a cultural revolution and countered the mindset that fostered World War I, times were changing in Bessie's favor. A societal transition was under way, the stiff-collared, pince-nez generation was being shown the door and the new generation that lined up had a very different look, for lurking in all of this was fodder for a feminist movement that would resurface in full force almost half a century later. After years of protest and demonstration by pioneering feminists, Congress finally passed the Suffragette Amendment, and young women were quick to develop a carefree, in- your-face attitude that probably took the movement beyond anything the suffragettes had imagined.⁶⁸

It is also possible that Bessie's upward mobility was invigorated by the advancements of women worldwide, and particularly in France, where suffragism was birthed (I shall return to this subject below in relation to Fréhel.)

In the late 1920's, Bessie Smith reached the height of her success and popularity in the performance and recording industries. Columbia Artists offered her a contract in 1923 when she released her first recording, *Down Hearted Blues*, written by Alberta Hunter and Lovie Austin.⁶⁹ The song had been recorded by Hunter herself and a few others, but Bessie's version stood out as definitive. Edward Brooks identifies a number

⁶⁷ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 19.

⁶⁸ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 19.

⁶⁹ Edward Brooks, *The Bessie Smith Companion: A Critical and Detailed Appreciation of the Recordings*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1982), 1.

of qualities that made her performances stand out and which contributed to her mass appeal, for white as well as black audiences:

- Quality of the voice: “Velvet quality of voice shines through the aural fog produced by primitive recording techniques.”
- Diction: “Every word can be heard”; narrative songs in particular required clarity in projecting the text.
- Bessie’s delivery of the words and ability to “swing and syncopate leaving her to provide between-the-beat accentuation and a more positive swing.”
- The bold and boastful nature of her lyrics may have boosted sales: “I’ve got the world in a jug, the stoppers in my hand.”
- Although she was a natural singer and wholly self-taught, “Her voice production and projection was of the highest quality”.
- Breathing: Dramatic phrasal pauses interjected in unexpected moments.
- Intonation and ornamentation: “Control of intonation was flawless and her work contains a greater abundance and variety of decoration than that of her contemporaries.”
- “Total commitment to almost every performance.”⁷⁰

Bessie was cognizant of the impact her recordings had on public perception, and so she agreed to schedule recording sessions between live appearances in the theaters. Patrons often listened to her recordings in anticipation of her esteemed performances, which were hailed by the critics. Following a show in Atlanta, *The Pittsburgh Courier* critic reported that:

Few white homes here are without her records made by the Columbia Phonograph Company. A prominent white music dealer told a reporter of the Preston News that Bessie Smith’s records actually outsell everything else in the catalog.⁷¹

In total, her discography consists of 160 sides, which “spanned only a quarter of her life and one-third of her singing career”, according to Brooks in *The Bessie Smith Companion*.⁷² Her repertoire drew from a variety of genres, and her performances offered more than just vocal impact.

⁷⁰ Brooks, *The Bessie Smith Companion*, 2-5.

⁷¹ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 65-66.

⁷² Brooks, *The Bessie Smith Companion*, xvii.

Her vocal material was often written by Tin Pan Alley tune-smiths, but she reshaped their songs and charged them with joy and sorrow that appeared to be born of personal experience. She was also a natural entertainer who danced with flair if not grace, and she performed comedy routines with enviable skill.⁷³

Bessie performed songs originally recorded by “Ma” Rainey and Ida Cox, but she was best known for writing her own lyrics to reflect real life experiences, in songs such as *Sorrowful Blues*, *Pinchbacks— Take ’Em Away*, and *Rocking Chair Blues*.⁷⁴ *Please Help Me Get Him Off My Mind* was written by Bessie in response to the recent split with her husband Jack Gee. “The pain in her voice inclines one to believe it.”⁷⁵ Some songs were attributed to Bessie, but it was unclear if she were the author.

In this case, she may well have written the words. No one can say for sure just how much material she actually contributed to songs that were credited to her or how many of the two dozen or so songs registered in her name actually originated with her. Like all blues singers who wrote songs, Bessie picked up ideas and lines wherever she could find them. Columbia’s early session logs gave few details; no one paid much attention to the source of the material being recorded, and some songs were not registered for copyright until months later.⁷⁶

Bessie Smith rarely included racial or radical inferences in her lyrics, in part because her audiences included many white patrons whom she did not wish to risk alienating, particularly in the South. “In view of her forcible character it is, on the surface, strange that Bessie should always be so careful to avoid direct criticism of whites on record, but presumably the white shareholders and management of Columbia Records, the only

⁷³ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 6.

⁷⁴ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 68.

⁷⁵ Brooks, *The Bessie Smith Companion*, 148.

⁷⁶ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 89.

company she recorded for, was responsible.”⁷⁷ Some lyrics were drawn from multiple songs recorded by other performers and pieced together like a collage.⁷⁸

In 1929 Bessie starred in the short sound film “St Louis Blues”, her one and only movie appearance. By this time her career had begun to wane, in part due to the financial crash of 1929, but predominately because the popularization of dance music challenged her brand of entertainment. This did not prevent her from reuniting during this period with one of her favorite collaborators, Porter Grainger,⁷⁹ to record the following tunes: *Yes Indeed He Do*, *Put it Right Here*, and *Devil’s Gonna Get You*. She struggled throughout the 1930s; sadly, in 1937, in the midst of planning a career resurgence, a tragic car accident ended her life. History has no means of determining if Bessie would have survived the swing era, but without the example of her achievements during the era of classic blues, later artists such as Ruth Brown and Big Mama Thornton in the 1950s, Janis Joplin and Aretha Franklin in the 1960s, and countless others since, would surely not have emerged. For decades her grave remained unmarked, much to the consternation of those fighting to keep Bessie’s memory alive, particularly given that Columbia Records continued to benefit from Bessie posthumously. In 1971 Janis Joplin, a fellow Columbia artist and avid Bessie Smith supporter, and business woman Juanita Green (whom as a young girl Bessie had advised to quit singing and try another career), united to share the cost of purchasing a headstone for Bessie’s grave.⁸⁰ Sadly, Joplin

⁷⁷ Brooks, *The Bessie Smith Companion*, 146.

⁷⁸ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 70.

⁷⁹ Brooks, *The Bessie Smith Companion*, 150.

⁸⁰ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 277-27.

died two weeks later, but her gesture was a testament of the impact the “Empress of the Blues” had on future generations of singers.

CHAPTER III:

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS: GENDER, RACE AND CLASS

The biographical histories of Fréhel and Bessie Smith have yielded multiple parallels, and the social constructs through which they were acculturated were rooted in patriarchal societies that deliberately prevented women from achieving socio-economic autonomy. In Bessie’s case, there was also the specter of race to consider. Fréhel’s racial background was not a barrier; however, for Bessie the triple challenges of gender, class, and above all race were inescapable, as her rise to international acclaim defied societal norms that prevented the majority of African Americans from attaining economic stability and upward mobility in the United States. Even after World War I, many African American women were restricted to domestic work, whereby they earned a pittance in exchange for back-breaking labor in white homes: “During the post-slavery decades, the paid work available to black women—the work that was in fact preserved for them—was house cleaning, child care, cooking and clothes washing.”⁸¹ In a world where white women rarely suffered the same kinds of obstacles, Bessie managed to escape economic deprivation and find a viable existence in the entertainment industry, but her personal success did not negate the realities suffered by most African American women. Some scholars have suggested that she was somewhat indifferent to the struggles of those in her community, because her songs were not obviously concerned with “direct

⁸¹ Angela Yvonne Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, (New York: Pantheon, 1998), 103.

social protest”.⁸² But while Bessie aimed not to racially alienate her white audiences, and often inclined herself to feminist narratives, which naturally appealed to women from diverse racial and socio-economic backgrounds, in tunes like *Washwoman’s Blues* it is clear that she was “woke” to the realities of her people. I would suggest that this was not unlike slaves, who would conceal hidden messages in spirituals and the blues, allowing them to address the plight of their communities without inviting censorship from their white bosses.

French women endured similar socially regressive practices, whereby after the French Revolution, Napoleon put into place a series of codes that imposed heavy restrictions on them.⁸³ For instance, in the event of divorce, women were forced to forfeit their parental rights to their children, and any hope of financial support was limited.

If a wife left home, the husband had the authority to cut off financial support and demand an indemnity, paid by his wife. A married woman could not operate a business without her husband’s consent. A woman existed almost as a child in the eyes of the legal system.⁸⁴

Pervasive hierarchical systems distinguished between whether a Parisian woman were married or single. Marital status determined society’s perceptions of women; if married, a woman would be subjected to duties reserved in private spaces, as the domesticated, well-behaved and child-bearing caretaker. Women spent many years resisting laws that stifled feminist independence, and it is during the Belle Époque that subtle changes began to take effect. French women witnessed a shift from domestic restriction to public

⁸² Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 101.

⁸³ Meghan Leigh Mika, "Women of the Belle Époque and World War One: Representation Versus Reality," (Master’s thesis, Wayne State University, Detroit MI, 2009), 11-12.

⁸⁴ Mika, "Women of the Belle Époque and World War One: Representation Versus Reality," 12.

visibility, not least due to the continued impact of industrialization and increased needs for labor. Sectors of working-class people emerged that afforded lower classes an opportunity to establish higher social and economic standings. It is this social fabric from which Fréhel would emerge.

In the early twentieth century, suffragist and feminist movements were burgeoning worldwide, and Chris Albertson suggests that Bessie may have benefited from such movements.⁸⁵ African American suffragists had a long history going back to the early eighteenth century, and in the nineteenth century Sojourner Truth and Ida B. Wells both led movements that aimed to educate and mobilize African American woman around the social implications of racial and gender disparities. Shirley Chisholm, the first African American woman to run for president, believed that “in many respects it was more difficult to be a woman than a black.”⁸⁶ Kimberlé Crenshaw, a pioneer in critical race theory, developed the concept of *intersectionality*, in order to codify and explicate the complexities of biases inherent in patriarchal and white societies.⁸⁷ In the case of Bessie Smith, one must acknowledge a “double discrimination”, whereby she is both ‘black’ and a woman. The social implications of being a woman are fortified and complicated by “blackness”, and the understanding of this ideological complex is essential to understanding Bessie’s “otherness”. The classic blues transformed the position of the African American woman, taking her from the community to individualism, from sacred to secu-

⁸⁵ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 19.

⁸⁶ Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, “Contextualizing from Slavery to Freedom in the Study of Post Emancipation Black Women’s History,” *The Journal of Negro History* 85, no. 1/2, (2000):36-39.

⁸⁷ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics”, *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989: 139-167.

lar, church to stage, spirituals to blues – all of which confounded the expectations of the wider American public. Although patriarchal dominance continued to pervade the consciousness of women and impact their professional status, the careers of Fréhel and Bessie Smith, irrespective of their personal struggles, served as examples of a social progression. The economic rise of the realist and the classic blues singers parallels the emergence of working class women worldwide, an evolution from the domestic domain to the workplace and professional arena.

Fréhel and Bessie Smith were from very different parts of the world, yet they were part of a unique sisterhood created by conditions emerging across all the increasingly interconnected societies of Western industrialized nations. They were inextricably intertwined due to social advances that impacted women in both Europe and the United States. Though their immediate objectives were to secure their positions in their respective worlds, and neither was explicitly a social activist, the way in which they pursued their careers and led their lives challenged universal views of gender, race and patriarchal ideology. These women functioned as mediators; benefitting from social progress and changes in ideological discourse, they defied the limitations of perceived power structures, racial and gender biases, and thus opened up a world of possibilities for them and generations of women to follow.

THE SINGER WHO HAS LIVED

There is a commonality that exists between the realist and classic blues singer: a complex of related traits that arise from and appeal to the sociological advances ubiqui-

tous during the period between the two world wars. Both types of singer typically endured challenging childhoods, and began performing in the streets for menial recompense before they were teenagers. Fréhel's mother involved herself in prostitution, often referred to sadly as the oldest profession in the world, just as so many women had done before her in nineteenth-century Paris. Bessie Smith lost both parents before her teenage years, and was cared for by a bitter sister, who often abused her and her siblings. As a young girl, Bessie's appetite to perform for the passersby in her town made a lasting impact on the unfolding of her career. Fréhel began performing in the streets of Bohemian Paris; in her early teens she also sold cosmetics door to door, until she encountered a high-class prostitute who inspired her to seek her own path to a sustainable professional life. Both Fréhel and Bessie Smith responded to their communities' affirmation of their innate abilities. This awareness gradually positioned them in the center of a growing trend, the popularization of women performers whose songs were made to reflect their real lives.

Bessie and Fréhel were representations of social uplift from the streets to the stage. The essence of the realist and classic blues singer, however, is rooted in feminine defiance and, directly or indirectly, communicates expressions of social consciousness reflective of a human pain and suffering that was all too familiar to members of working class communities. In *Chanteuse in the City: The Realist Singer in French Film*, Kelley Conway writes about this phenomenon in the French context, but it is also applicable to the classic blues singer:

The realist singer was perceived to have come (and usually did come, in fact) from the working class. This aspect of the singer's past was celebrated and used to establish her authenticity. Popular with work-

ing-class and bourgeois audiences alike, she sang songs, and sometimes performed dances, that evoked the lives and geography of the Paris working class and the underworld. ⁸⁸

These women glamorized “otherness” in their refusal to submit to standards of acceptability – what has sometimes been referred to as ‘respectability politics’, whereby a system of predetermined moral codes and ethics defined by the powerful in society deems what is acceptable behavior for society as a whole, including those at the bottom of the hierarchy (women, minorities, the poor), and particularly for public consumption. For women, this standard of respectability rested on how they adorned themselves, how sexually assertive they were, their body type, and their skin pigmentation. In Bessie Smith’s case, her heavy build was typically associated with being strong, aggressive, and ‘matronly’, and her dark complexion were often seen as unattractive or even “ugly”. During her lifetime, prejudicial descriptions of her physical attributes spoke to society’s imposition on matters of “otherness”, and the general dehumanization of African American women: because you do not reflect the standard, you are a threat to society, to its culture and even at times, a physical threat. And such prejudices could operate within as well as across racial and other boundaries, particularly for those within a marginalized group who aspired to greater ‘respectability’. In “Life According to the Beat: James Baldwin, Bessie Smith, and the Perilous Sounds of Love,” Josh Kun writes:

Bessie Smith signified a version of American blackness he [Baldwin] had yet to confront. She was the summation of all the stereotypes, all the prejudices, all the projected racial and sexual fantasies, all the watermelons and pickaninnies and dialectic speech, and all the externally imposed self-hate. It was Bessie who, in her first studio test in 1922, was rejected for being “too rough”; it was Bessie whom both Okeh and Black Swan—the black label for which W. C. Handy and W. E. B. Du Bois sat on the board—turned down because her voice was too rough, too Negro, too black; it was Bessie who had been born in abject poverty in

⁸⁸ Kelley Conway, *Chanteuse in the City: The Realist Singer in French Film*, 1st ed, (Los Angeles, CA, University of California Press, 2004), 23.

Chattanooga, Tennessee; and it was Bessie who was the most popular singer of “classic blues,” which many educated, upwardly mobile blacks in the 1920s condemned as a crude art form and, ultimately, a “racial embarrassment.”⁸⁹

Similarly, after ten years in Russia, Fréhel’s appearance on her return to France was met with some consternation. The slender young body she once possessed had been replaced by a full-figured physique -- strikingly similar, in fact, to Bessie’s body type.

Another area in which parallels emerge is in the relationship of realist and blues singers to their elite patrons and audiences. Here there was fantasy and a degree of knowing hypocrisy on both sides. Upper class patrons might publicly deny or brush off their penchant for the consumption of Bohemian culture, passing it off as uncivilized or improper, but privately revel in it for the sake of entertainment and the thrill of transgression. The realist and the blues singer can be seen as revolutionaries or prototypes of the successful woman, not for their desire to obtain “the high life”, but by establishing a platform to present apparently authentic personas and to be paid while doing it. For this, the realist and the blues singer may have recognized the hypocrisy, but they smiled and cajoled the patrons while simultaneously making subtle and satirical inferences through sarcasm, humor, and sexual innuendos.

THEMES AND MESSAGES

In 1937 Fréhel appeared in an internationally successful French film, *Pépé le Moko*, directed by Julien Duvier, starring Jean Gabin. The narrative captures the exploits of a gangster and wayward character named Pépé, who is holed up in the Casbah

⁸⁹ Josh Kun, “Life According to the Beat: James Baldwin, Bessie Smith, and the Perilous Sounds of Love”, in *James Baldwin Now*, ed. Dwight A. McBride, (New York, and London: New York UP, 1999), 307—30.

in Algiers hiding from the police. He falls in love with a woman, who reminds him of all the things he misses about his beloved Paris. During Fréhel's emotional scene in *Pépé le Moko*, she muses about the glory days in Montmartre during a poignant moment with Jean Gabin. Her character speaks passionately about the past as she begins playing an old recording of her rendition of "Ou est-il donc", a nostalgic song written by the prolific composer Vincent Scotto (1874-1952) in 1926, with lyrics by A. Decaye and Lucien Carol (French actors).⁹⁰ The following are the lyrics of the final verse and refrain.

Verse:

Mais Montmartre semble disparaître
 Car hélas de saison en saison
 Des Abbesses à la Place du Tertre,
 On démolit nos vieilles maisons.
 Sur les terrains vagues de la butte
 De grandes banques naîtront bientôt,
 Où ferez-vous alors vos culbutes,
 Vous, les pauvres gosses à Poulbot?
 En regrettant le temps jadis
 Nous chanterons, songeant à Salis,
 Montmartre ton « De Profundis»!

But Montmartre seems to disappear
 Because alas, from season to season
 From Abbesses to the Place of Tertre,
 Our old homes are destroyed.
 Over the empty ground of the butte
 Great banks will be born soon,
 Where will you do your somersaults,
 You, the poor kids of Poulbot?
 Regretting the days of old
 We will sing, dreaming of Salis,
 Montmartre your 'De Profundis'!

Refrain:

Où est-il mon moulin de la Place Blanche?
 Mon tabac et mon bistrot du coin?
 Tous les jours étaient pour moi Dimanche!
 Où sont-ils les amis les copains?
 Où sont-ils tous mes vieux bals musette?
 Leurs javas au son de l'accordéon
 Où sont-ils tous mes repas sans galette?
 Avec un cornet de frites à dix ronds
 Où sont-ils donc?

Where is my mill on the Place Blanche?
 My tabac and my local bistro?
 Every day was Sunday to me!
 Where are my friends and companions?
 Where are my old musette balls?
 Their javas accompanied by the accordion
 Where are all my meals without cake?
 With a cone of fries of ten rounds
 Where are they?

Fréhel sits motionless with a hypnotic gaze, and suddenly she begins to sing with the record. The emotion builds, and tears fill her eyes in what is probably one of the most heart-wrenching moments captured on film. The sentiment embodies the specter of

⁹⁰ Pierre M. Lavallée, "J'ai la mémoire qui chante: La petite histoire des GRANDES chansons qui ont laissé leur marque," accessed June 29, 2018, (<https://memoirechante.wordpress.com/2011/02/20/frehel-ou-est-il-donc/>).

nostalgia, a somber reflection of happier times in the past. Fréhel's interpretation gives one the impression that she is bemoaning her life's misfortunes in love and abandonment. This was often the case in realist songs during this era.

The realist song is almost always about loss and tends to be intensely cynical about the possibility of romantic love and domestic stability. Sometimes called the *chanson vécue* ["lived" or "true to life" song], it typically chronicles the plight of a woman facing heartbreak and poverty.⁹¹

The effect of Fréhel's performance is visceral. In the experience of seeing and hearing it, one is able to sense the soul of the woman. It is a revelatory mode of expression, whereby one understands that in this moment, art becomes life and naturally, the narrator becomes the protagonist or the subject of the action. The storyteller is intertwined with the narrative and must not be disassociated from the action. She does not serve as entertainment or a conduit of the expression solely, but the embodiment and essence of it. In this way, it seems as if the singer authored the words and the song becomes a living thing, not merely a vehicle of expression directed towards the audience, but the personification of the emotional self. The witnesses are drawn to the artist, who "appears" to be a victim of great misfortune; however, according to Conway the implication is that the realist's affinity for injecting raw truths into the song is what makes her indefatigable -- not infallible, but courageous and unafraid of appearing vulnerable. Realist songs only exist fully through the women who bring them to life with their experiences.

The inter-texts of the singers' biographies also mitigate the passivity of the realist song. The characters of the songs who endure violence, betrayal and prostitution for the love of their men are

⁹¹ Conway, "The *Chanteuse at the City Limits*," 9.

brought to life by women singers celebrated for their resilience, physical strength, powerful voices, and aesthetic innovation.⁹²

Conway goes on to say:

Frequently, the realist singer's persona is submissive and fatalistic. The songs often tell the stories of passive, dependent women incapable of escaping their brutal men. Yet the realist singer is more than the mere victim her songs and film appearances might imply. She expresses frankly her sexual desires and the hope that true love is still possible.⁹³

Sexual freedom was certainly an important theme in the blues, and for Bessie Smith, but here it signified against the repressive legacy of slavery and racism, and was thus both more powerful and more contested than in France. According to Angela Davis in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, the freedom of the slave signified a shift towards uncharted territory, explored in "the new blues consciousness".

The new blues consciousness was shaped by and gave expression to at least two of these three transformations: travel and sexuality. In both male and female blues, travel and sexuality are ubiquitous themes, handled both separately and together. But what finally is most striking is the way the blues registered sexuality as a tangible expression of freedom; it was this dimension that most profoundly marked and defined the secularity of the blues.⁹⁴

The idea of the blues inciting "sexuality as a tangible expression of freedom" was a foreign idea prior to the abolition of slavery. The body of the African American woman did not belong to her: it was a source of physical labor, and a sexual tool and diversion for white men, the proprietors of these women. This continued to be the story for many African American women decades after emancipation. Most recently, the story of Recy Taylor, an African American woman who in 1944 was raped by a gang of white men in her hometown, entered the consciousness of America after her name was included in a

⁹² Conway, *The Chanteuse at the City Limits*, 10.

⁹³ Conway, *The Chanteuse at the City Limits*, 10.

⁹⁴ Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 8.

speech given by Oprah Winfrey. The NAACP and various civil rights groups had fought for decades for justice to be done in this case, in which the men involved confessed but were never convicted; eventually all died without ever having paid for their crimes. In January 2018, I attended a public screening of the newly released film, “The Rape of Recy Taylor”, spearheaded by Professor Crystal Feimster from the Department of African American Studies at Yale University, who also appeared in the film. The narrative was guided primarily by the memories offered by Recy Taylor’s siblings, and surviving relatives of the perpetrators.

Recy Taylor’s story is a notable case, but such crimes were all too familiar to African American women throughout this period. Although Bessie Smith did not experience the horror of gang rape, the reality remained that she and many others like her were always fearful for the safety and security of their lives. It is documented that Bessie also endured instances of abuse from various relationships throughout her life. Yet Bessie boldly expressed sexual freedom in a number of songs, which sought to drive a narrative embracing women’s autonomy and feminist liberation. The song, “I need a little sugar in my bowl” is a good example.

Tired of bein' lonely, tired of bein' blue,
I wished I had some good man, to tell my troubles to
Seem like the whole world's wrong, since my man's been gone
I need a little sugar in my bowl,
I need a little hot dog, on my roll
I can stand a bit of lovin', oh so bad,
I feel so funny, I feel so sad
I need a little steam-heat, on my floor,
Maybe I can fix things up, so they'll go
What's the matter, hard papa, come on and save your mama's soul
'Cause I need a little sugar, in my bowl, doggone it,
I need a little sugar in my bowl

Sexual culture in France during the nineteenth century was linked to a systemic acceptance of prostitution determined by social hierarchies in class and gender. Repressive though this was, white French women inevitably did not view sexuality and power in the exactly the same manner as African American women. The working poor and lower classes were drawn to partake in prostitution for means of generating income;⁹⁵ if anything, French women aspired to attain the level and social advantages available to a courtesan, a higher-class prostitute, as Fréhel's admiration for the Spanish courtesan Otéro demonstrates.

VOCAL STYLES AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

Although both Bessie and Fréhel's overarching intentions were primed to capture emotionally authentic representations of their personal experiences, the sounds of their voices were very different in timbre, delivery, and expression. Fréhel's voice was lighter and more narrowly focused than Bessie's, and though strong, lacked the immense power of her American contemporary. Yet there are certainly broader parallels between descriptions of French realist singers and their counterparts in the classic blues.

According to Conway in her dissertation, *The Chanteuse at the City Limits: Femininity, Paris and the Cinema*:

The realist singers usually possessed deep voices, typically mezzo soprano or even contralto. Their voices were described by contemporary critics as "veritable," "naturelle," and "brutale."⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Mounica V. Kota, "Gender and Class Differences in 19th Century French Prostitution," *Oglethorpe Journal of Undergraduate Research* 3, no. 1, Article 5 (2014): 10.

⁹⁶ Conway, *The Chanteuse at the City Limits*, 8.

Later in her book she goes into further detail:

These were not the pretty, trained voices capable of glorious coloratura one heard at a performance of an Offenbach operetta, but rather nasal voices that frequently ventured into the deeper chest tones and often broke, to great tragic effect, in the middle of a song. These were voices belonging to women perceived to have “lived.”⁹⁷

In a similar fashion, the most impressive quality of Bessie’s voice is its guttural and unadulterated sound. Some even referred to it as rough, possibly implying it was not beautiful or subtle, feminine nor pleasing, but always powerful: “what really grabs the listener’s attention is that full-throated, resonant voice that won Bessie new followers at every appearance.”⁹⁸ Yet the natural gift of the voice did not exclude other acute musical abilities.

Bessie’s commanding singing voice, her superb timing, and her thoroughly musical approach to even the most banal material was something no one in her field could match.⁹⁹

It has not been documented whether or not Bessie or Fréhel received any formal training, but it seems unlikely. In any case, their voices were for the most part described in terms of their emotional and dramatic impacts, in a similar manner as seasoned actors. And the voice of a woman who has “lived”, and that can appeal to “le peuple”, should surely not sound prim and proper -- it may even gain in authenticity from a worn rather than conventionally ‘beautiful’ tone.

Bessie Smith and Fréhel’s recording careers heightened their popularity worldwide, yet their continuing affinity for live performance cannot be overstated. The emergence of electronic equipment such as the microphone and other new sound technolo-

⁹⁷ Conway, *The Chanteuse in the City*, 184.

⁹⁸ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 35.

⁹⁹ Albertson, *Bessie: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 35.

gies in the 1920s was frowned upon by French purists, and particularly by Fréhel, who resisted the new microphone culture often exploited by jazz singers and crooners of the Tin Pan Alley era in the United States. Both she and Bessie Smith prided themselves on being able to sing robustly for their audiences acoustically, who were also accustomed to their raw performances. In *The Chanteuse in the City*, Kelley Conway writes about the effects of technological advances on the realist singer:

One casualty of this intimacy [made possible by the microphone], however, is loss of the community, of a shared listening, that was a key element of the nostalgia and appeal of the café-concert and the realist aesthetic. Despite the imaginary of intimacy, of individual address, new technologies of recorded or cinematic entertainment undeniably placed a greater distance between the performer and her audience, whether through the intermediary of projected shadows or amplified signals.¹⁰⁰

A particular aspect of “individual address” that did not negate the audience or stifle Bessie Smith and Fréhel was their impact on the materials they performed and recorded. In Fréhel’s case, the majority of her output was written by known composers, whose backgrounds comprised of popular songs or repertoire exclusively intended for realist singers. Vincent Scotto was a prolific composer, writing some 4000 songs, many of which were recorded by Fréhel (including “Comme un Moineau”, “Musette”, “Tel qu’il est”, and “Où sont tous mes amants?”). In the beginning of Fréhel’s career, she focused on compositions by masters such Montéhus and Jean Richepin. She demonstrated profound admiration for Richepin, known for injecting anarchistic sentiments into his works.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Conway, *The Chanteuse in the City*, 184.

¹⁰¹ Coudeville-Vue, “Fréhel et Yvonne George,” 76.

Fréhel's career began to revive during the interwar period. She moved to carving out a specific repertoire suited to her own preferences and temperament.¹⁰² At the start of her recording career, which began in 1908 when she was still known as Pervenche, she sang light-hearted and sentimental ballads (“Fanfare d’amour” and “C’est une gosse”),¹⁰³ but her best known recordings were heard in films, where she often appeared as herself.¹⁰⁴ One of the most famous was “La Java Bleue”, with words by Géo Koger and Noël Renard and music by Vincent Scotto. It appeared in the movie *Une java* by Claude Orval, where she sings accompanied by an accordion, as she often did. Vincent Scotto wrote multiple songs for Fréhel that appeared in films in which she starred, such as “L’Amour des hommes” (1938), from the film *La Rue sans joie*, with words by André Hugon and Géo Koger. According to Lacombe, the song is “a real profession of realistic and feministic faith”.¹⁰⁵ It is heartbreakingly evident in Fréhel’s performance of the song that she is singing from personal experience.

L’Amour des hommes

Les hommes nous aiment
 Pas pour nous, mais pour eux!
 Ils sont tous les mêmes
 Et cachent bien leur jeu
 De façon adroite
 Ils se font doux d’abord
 Et puis ils nous exploitent
 Sans remords.
 Au lieu de caresse,
 Quand on rentre chez nous
 Hélas on encaisse

Men love us
 Not for us, but for themselves!
 They are all the same
 And they hide their game well
 In a cunning way
 They are sweet at first
 And then they exploit us
 Without remorse.
 Instead of caresses,
 When we get home
 Alas we get

¹⁰² Coudeville-Vue, “Fréhel et Yvonne George,” 78.

¹⁰³ Audrey Condeyville-Vue, “Fréhel et Yvonne George,”9.

¹⁰⁴ Conway, *Chanteuse in the City*, 4.

¹⁰⁵ Lacombe, *Fréhel*, 226: “une véritable profession de foi réaliste et féministe”.

Des mots durs (injures) et des coups.
L'amour, ce problème,
Ça compte pour bien peu!
Si les hommes nous aiment
C'est pour eux.

Harsh words and blows.
Love, this problem
It counts for very little!
If men love us
It is for them.

Fréhel's repertoire was not limited to realistic songs, but included character songs such as "La Môme Catch Catch", where her delivery is driven by descriptive words and imagery. Her discography includes more than 100 songs recorded between 1927 and 1939 for numerous labels, including Idéal, Odéon, Pathé, Polydor, Salabert, and Columbia.¹⁰⁶

One important difference between Bessie and Fréhel is that while the latter would often indulge in sentiments of nostalgia and hopelessness, as in songs like "Sans Lendemain", the former more often interpreted her material in a defiant manner that projected feminine autonomy, as in "Put it right Here". Fréhel's recording of "Sans Lendemain" is a clear example of a raw emotion that gives the song an undying appeal, yet it is ultimately passive. One might contrast it tellingly with Bessie's famous recording of "St. Louis Blues", where she begins in a deep state of melancholy, expressed in a moaning singing style, but progresses across the song to raucous defiance. But both artists were able to sing with robust emotion and reckless abandonment -- not in an artistic vein, as was common in most other arenas at that time, including popular music, but with an experience-driven delivery: it was this that marked them as so innovative, and would ensure that their influence endured long after their deaths.

¹⁰⁶ Coudeville-Vue, "Fréhel et Yvonne George," 9.

CHAPTER IV

CULTURAL EXCHANGE

Up until this point we have explored parallels between French realist song and American classic blues as if their practitioners were entirely unaware of developments on the opposite side of the Atlantic. Yet while the two genres certainly developed independently, the period in question was of course one of increasing transatlantic exchange, not least through rapid improvements in communications and transportation. This was important to all the arts, but particularly in the domain of popular culture, music included.

When Bessie Smith attained the height of her popularity in the early 1920s, it was a time when many high-profile African American celebrities were relocating to Paris. This transatlantic cultural exchange coincided with Fréhel's return to her homeland in 1922. Although she was not in the best physical and mental shape, her voice remained intact.¹⁰⁷ The Paris she had left a decade or so earlier was not the Paris to which she returned. "Les Années Folles" were in full bloom. "Negromania" and jazz were in vogue in "the city of light", when many of the hotspots were inundated with African American performers and patrons.

An American influence all the more exotic because it is colored by the black skin of its jazz musicians. The "Negro" is becoming fashionable, and the Bal Negro Street Blomet (see What future for the "Bal Nègre"?), Is a great success. A success largely assured by the artists of Montparnasse, epicenter of the artistic creation of the moment, come to listen to the biguines of Alexandre Stello while tasting the traditional Ti Punch. In 1925, Josephine Baker,

¹⁰⁷ Lacombe, *Fréhel*, 129.

dressed in her banana loincloth, completed this "negromania" by making a triumph in the famous Revue Nègre.....¹⁰⁸

Bessie Smith had little interest in rubbing shoulders with the rich and famous -- in this respect she was quite unlike Fréhel -- and she rejected the notion that relocating to Europe would heighten her fame. She never traveled outside the United States. Indifference to the success of her contemporaries and their enthusiastic acceptance by a foreign land endeared her to many American enthusiasts of her brand of the blues. And since there was no reciprocal vogue in America for French popular music, this was not an issue that she had to deal with at home.

Bessie kept up with such news from abroad through the black press and grapevine, but she showed no signs of envy—the world of European high society was one about which she knew nothing and cared even less. People close to her during this period recalled that she did not feel left behind, nor regarded her professional future with anything but optimism.¹⁰⁹

In contrast, Fréhel and other French popular musicians could not ignore the prominence of African-American cultural influences in Paris during the 1920s, and these played a significant role in Fréhel's reemergence in France after her sojourn in Russia.

But it is perhaps on the musical level that the influence was the most decisive with the arrival of some artists and enterprising musicians crazy for dance orchestras, which were all the craze in the USA. If one did not speak yet of jazz in the strict sense of the term, this influx reinforced a new orientation, and more specifically the playing styles of

¹⁰⁸ Fergus, "Chanson française: de la Grande Guerre aux Années folles," November 5, 2012, <https://www.ago-ravox.fr/culture-loisirs/culture/article/chanson-francaise-de-la-grande-125275>: "Une influence américaine d'autant plus exotique qu'elle est colorée du noir de la peau de ses musiciens de jazz. Le « nègre » devient à la mode, et le Bal Nègre de la rue Blomet (cf. Quel avenir pour le « Bal Nègre » ?), connaît un grand succès. Un succès largement assuré par les artistes de Montparnasse, épicerie de la création artistique du moment, venus écouter là les biguines d'Alexandre Stello en dégustant le traditionnel Ti Punch. Dès 1925, Josephine Baker, vêtue de son pagne de bananes, complète cette « négromania » en faisant un triomphe dans la célèbre Revue Nègre....."

¹⁰⁹ Lacombe, *Fréhel*, 204.

certain artists, even if this invasion was not to the taste of the supporters of the old-fashioned music hall.¹¹⁰

African Americans embraced Paris as a refuge from racial oppression and a site of cultural acceptance, a place where sitting in a café and enjoying a cup of coffee alongside white patrons was not seen as a criminal act. Paris was a utopia for expatriates from the United States, particularly performers such as Josephine Baker, who eventually would become a French citizen. Many African American artists flocked to the perceived city of “colorblindness”, where they were celebrated for their “otherness” and exoticism. No longer did the sting of racism function as a means of total disenfranchisement, as had been their fate for centuries. In social terms, Fréhel was in the center of it all, and not only in the fashionable cafés of Montmartre, where people of color were both on stage and in the audience. American boxing had become a popular phenomenon in Paris in the 1920’s and Fréhel frequently attended matches. To her, boxing represented the manner in which she battled her own struggles in daily life. It is well known that she was seen around town with America’s first African American heavyweight boxing champion, Jack Johnson, who was in exile for challenging his country’s racist systems. His braggadocio, and the allure of his athletic physique, charmed the chanteuse.

Jack Johnson had everything that impressed Fréhel. With a shaved head and perfect body, he was the ideal guest for Parisian party-

¹¹⁰ Lacombe, *Fréhel*, 137: “Mais c’est peut-être sur le plan musical que l’influence était la plus déterminante avec l’arrivée de quelques artistes et musiciens animateurs fous des orchestras de dance qui faisaient fureur aux U.S.A. Si l’on ne parlait pas encore de jazz au sens strict du terme, ils étaient de plus en plus nombreux à aller renforcer l’attitude et le jeu plus spécifique de certains artistes, même si cette invasion n’était pas du goût des tenants du music-hall à l’ancienne.”

goers . . . Between his first two fights in Paris, he lived it up. He was seen a lot accompanying Fréhel....¹¹¹

Thrust into a new world, Fréhel had to reconfigure her position in the performance cafés of Paris. According to Lacombe, because she sang real songs, the transition occurred instinctively.

The professional and personal destinies of Fréhel and Bessie Smith were bound by their opposition to patriarchal hegemony and their refusal to succumb to traditional domestic roles. Their personas and chosen lifestyles were antithetical to the idea that a woman can only find content through marriage and motherhood. Fréhel's failed marriage to Robert Holland, who offered a comfortable bourgeois lifestyle on the surface, but a reality of infidelities, forced her to choose between comfort and superficial respectability on the one hand, and a more precarious freedom on the other. She chose the latter. Conversely, Bessie never ceased to do what pleased her with either men or women, even in the context of her marriages. Both women commanded social, economic, and sexual autonomy in their chosen paths as realist and blues singers. In *Blues Legacy and Black Feminism*, Angela Davis writes about the role of the classic blues in challenging traditional roles for African American women.

The representations of love and sexuality in women's blues often blatantly contradicted mainstream ideological assumptions regarding women and being in love. They also challenged the notion that women's "place" was in the domestic sphere. Such notions were based on the social realities of middle-class white women's lives, but were incongruously applied to all women, regardless of race or class.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Lacombe, *Fréhel*, 98: "Jack Johnson avait tout pour impressionner Fréhel. Crâne rasé et corps superbe, il était pour les fêtards Parisiens le convive idéal. . . Entre ses deux premiers combats parisiens, il mena joyeuse vie. On le voyait beaucoup avec Fréhel... "

¹¹² Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 11.

Despite the commonalities between Fréhel and Bessie, the issue of race would nevertheless haunt Bessie's narrative and set her apart from Fréhel, whose European ancestry protected her from racial discrimination and allowed her privileges unknown to Bessie. Even the "Empress of Blues", one of the highest paid African American women of her era, could not escape the stigma of race.

For both women, however, the commitment to their profession would give them a social status extraordinary for women of their time. The prestige acquired by Fréhel and Bessie Smith placed them amongst elite figures in their societies (whom they nevertheless derided, and often mocked in their performances). Although they would not accept anything less than respect and honor as consummate professionals, they also understood that certain associations were essential to optimize their notoriety. Fréhel maintained a steady stream of royal sympathizers, socialized with high society revelers and prestigious personalities at her performances. Although Bessie Smith shunned this kind of association, she was not afraid to flaunt her wealth, owning her own train to transport her entire show, which allowed her to physically move about the country without being at the mercy of another.

The overarching question remains, how did these genres impact popular culture and the general consciousness of the societies from which they sprang? Women's perspectives -- their hopes, fears, disappointments, and triumphs -- were no longer private matters for the singers of the blues and the realist song, whose expressive freedoms captivated women across socio-economic boundaries. Ordinary women were given a voice, by being offered an example of empowerment through a performance culture that

was authored by 'real women'. Bessie Smith was hailed for her uncanny ability to sing with robust feeling because according to Davis, 'The birth of the blues was an aesthetic evidence of new psychological realities within the black population.'¹¹³ Kelley Conway suggests a similar phenomenon at work with the realist singer: "Indeed for all her apparent pessimism and passivity, the realist singer represents one of the few forums for the expression of female subjectivity in the 1920s and 1930s in France."¹¹⁴

CONCLUSION

Bessie Smith and Fréhel's most notable commonalities were of the kind that most artists seek: professional autonomy, artistic freedom and mass acceptance. Prior to their deaths, both women were not exactly household names, as their careers had fallen victim to personal challenges and new musical trends. Bessie was at least planning to recapture the success of her past; Fréhel, on the other hand, was seen haunting neighborhood bistros, not as the toast of the town she once was, but as a shell of herself. Their endings mirrored their arduous beginnings. But during the height of their success, they had both managed to seize the hearts of a large public, sealing a lasting effect that would transcend their personal narratives and shortcomings.

The emergence of these two singers began in the streets of their respective neighborhoods, where they were in close proximity to "le peuple" or the folk, yet they both went on to appeal to a much broader public, and to elite members of society. In

¹¹³ Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 5.

¹¹⁴ Conway, *Chanteuse in the City*, 6.

Bessie Smith's case, her greatest appeal was in fact amongst white people, Southerners in particular. In like manner, Kelley Conway writes of the French realist singers.

This "rags to riches" narrative is present in the discourse surrounding each and every singer in my study and constitutes a key element of realist singer persona. The notion that even a poor, uneducated woman could achieve financial and social success through a career in the café-concert provided a powerful fantasy of social mobility for women. The café-concert thus permitted women —both as spectators and as performers -- an active role in new modes of consumption and promised the lucky few who became its stars an unprecedented visibility in French culture.¹¹⁵

The “new modes of consumption”, made possible by technological advancements in the recording and film industries, helped to mold an image of women who had faced horrible realities. As was mentioned earlier, Fréhel's filmography is an extensive body of work, where she often portrayed a realist singer or representations of women ridden with familiar contradictions. Unfortunately, Bessie Smith only appeared in one film. But in both cases, the women were depicted on screen as strong, independent, and not deferring to men. When Conway writes about the complexities of the French chanteuses and their wider impact, with a geographical transposition she could again in many ways be describing the African American classic blues singer.

The figure of the realist singer, which evokes Paris popular and a very particular version of femininity, resonates in an especially intense way during the period between the wars and functions as a flexible icon for a number of desires and tensions around gender and class. Her cultural construction, on-and offstage, within and beyond the diegesis, is rife with contradictions: she is powerful, yet frail, even wrecked; she is wealthy but speaks to the poor; she grew up in poverty, but appeals to both the rich and the poor; she can be sexually aggressive, yet is often under the thumb of a man. She serves as an emblem of an emotional, nostalgic topography of Paris and lost sense of community already articulated after World War I, yet she also stands for a newer, more

¹¹⁵ Conway, “*The Chanteuse at the City Limits*,” 70-71.

threatening conception of modern femininity associated with the twentieth century, the city, and mass culture.¹¹⁶

Biographical research on the lives of Bessie and Fréhel revealed a wealth of similarities that appear to go beyond mere coincidence. Two women from very different geographical and cultural perspectives emerge during the interwar period, an era of social and political upheaval. Bessie Smith, an African American singer of the classic blues, and Fréhel, a Parisian legend of the realist song. The two singers sustained careers in the recording and film industries and forged a path for future generations of women performers in popular culture -- but not without maneuver, some luck, and heartbreak. Ultimately, their impact on the evolution of women's liberation went way beyond their personal narratives and struggles.

The most important indication that the realist and blues singer are inextricably linked has less to do with their shared humble beginnings and tragic endings than with their enduring appeal as women performers, who seized the imagination of countless women from diverse social backgrounds and created a community of women with shared hopes, through experiences lived in love and pain. One may draw the conclusion that Bessie Smith and Fréhel, despite their personal contradictions, were instrumental in inspiring social advances among women from all economic backgrounds, who suffered common experiences within male-dominated societies. Fréhel seemed to remain the victim of failed relationships and addictions, but Bessie Smith maintained control of her destiny, in that, following an absence from the public eye during the decline of the blues, she was attempting to return to the industry. Fate dealt her an untimely blow.

¹¹⁶ Conway, *Chanteuse in the City*, 4.

Bessie and Fréhel did not pursue an overt program of challenging archaic power structures and patriarchal practices, or seek to be fashioned as outliers in the entertainment industry -- but in song, they were rabble-rousing trailblazers and reflections of unknown women past, present and future. Their social relevance and awareness, and their sheer courage, allowed them to demonstrate an unprecedented expressive freedom in their songs, particularly in live performances, which most fully projected the depth of their artistry in filtering real life experiences. The realist and blues singer were conduits for the validation of a woman's right to be the proprietor of her life, and helped establish the relevance and importance of ordinary women's experience by communicating subjective narratives for mass consumption. Few performers can rival Bessie Smith and Fréhel for the inspiration they have provided to others. The manner in which they sang and the rhetoric heard in their songs were uniquely feminine, but feminine in ways that others had rarely dared to express before, addressing directly and indirectly themes that are crucial for the empowerment of women. The magic of their dynamic selves encouraged untold numbers of women to fantasize about, and indeed to realize, aspirations toward a better and fuller life.

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