

I read "Mae West: An Icon in Black and White" by Jill Watts expecting a tale of the sultry temptress peppering maladroit suitors with her famous double entendres. I discovered the enthralling biography of a complex woman. Watts explores the how and why of West's voyage from rags to riches. She contends that West was a trickster, an artist who leads you seductively down a garden path, around a bend and smack into a blistering confrontation with your own biases and hypocrisies. West had what separates art from craft and artist from performer. West, the artist, had popular appeal. In spite of the best efforts of the guardians of public morality to gag West, she connected with her audiences and delivered a socially provocative message in a palatable form.

West was born in 1897 to an ambitious, but poor mother and a third rate boxer. West's mother passed unfulfilled ambition to Mae. At age seven Mae started to perform in vaudeville halls. Her artistic influences encompassed African-American comedic performers who used a device called signifying.

Black signifying rests in double-voicedness, innuendo, parody, rapping, boasting, insulting, and other forms still present in the work of African-American artists. Black signification, unlike its white brother, is a deadly serious rebellion which compels white audiences to laugh uproariously at themselves.

West said, "It isn't what I do, but how I do it. It isn't what I say, but how I say it, and how I look when I do and say it."

Mae brought hidden African-American culture out of the closet. While visiting Chicago in the 1920s, a mecca for blacks migrating from the southern states, she adopted jazz and the blues. She included jazz bands with black musicians in her live performances long before the civil rights movement and she became one of the earliest white blues singers. But more shockingly sensational, she replaced her early live performance finale, the cooch, a dance with European burlesque roots, with the shimmy. The shimmy was pure African-American and a parody of prudish white norms. Mae's shimmy set the censors onto her swirling skirt tails.

There is irony to West's relationship with the censors. Mae didn't drink. She worked hard to support her mother, her father, her sister and herself. She was decorated for her service during World War I. She wrote her own scripts and choreographed her own dances. After signing with Paramount Studios, the studio declared bankruptcy. West's film, "She Done Him Wrong" written by West, starring West, and back-seat-directed by West saved Paramount from the bailiff.

It was what she implied, not what she did that offended her critics. And it wasn't primarily her sexual innuendo, but her flirtation with African-American culture and her inverting gender roles that most disturbed the censors. What upset her critics won her millions of fans. Censors cut her films mercilessly, but West managed to slip celluloid messages through the iron curtain of scissors which were adored by her fans and deplored even more by the outfoxed censors.

She always performed in a full length dress which concealed five inch heels. She had duplicate, slightly looser dresses for when she had to be filmed sitting. Only her arms were bared or as a reviewer observed, "she bares nothing, yet reveals everything."

She was no flash-in-the-pan. She started in vaudeville, successfully moved to Hollywood and continued her career on Broadway and in Los Vegas. The Trickster wrote an autobiography about her hard work, determination and creative energy which she entitled "Goodness Had Nothing to Do with It."