

St. Louis Blues

By Mark Cantor

Seriously flawed, but absolutely essential. Terrific music, yet a missed musical opportunity. A ground-breaking film, but one filled with racial stereotypes. All of the above may be obvious contradictions, yet all describe the same film, director Dudley Murphy's flawed masterpiece "St. Louis Blues." Produced in June 1929, and released in September 1929 by Radio Pictures (soon to be rechristened RKO), this short subject has become an iconic piece of early sound film, and one of the most essential early films dealing with African-American music and life.

"St. Louis Blues" tells the story of a young woman (Bessie Smith) who has returned to her rooming house where she learns from the participants of a hallway crap game that there is an encounter in her room between her man, played by Jimmy Mordecai, and an even younger woman played by the beautiful Isabelle Washington. After confronting Mordecai, he knocks Bessie to the ground, and as Mordecai and Washington leave the room, Bessie begins to sing W.C. Handy's classic "St. Louis Blues."

The scene shifts to a nightclub where Bessie continues the song, accompanied by a contingent from Fletcher Henderson's orchestra, here under the leadership of stride pianist James P. Johnson. Bessie is assisted vocally by the Johnson-Handy Singers under the direction of J. Rosamund Johnson. Jimmy Mordecai enters the nightclub, performs a dance to the delight of the audience, then re-engages with Bessie. Mordecai steals Bessie's bankroll as they dance, and then exits laughing, as Bessie concludes the song.

The entire short lasts a little under 15 minutes and effectively tells its story, while also reinforcing various stereotypes about African-Americans: black men spend their days on their knees getting drunk and shooting craps; the light-skinned black woman is more desirable than the darker skinned African-American woman; black people drink and sing the blues when they are sad; black women forgive their philandering males with little or no thought. Both story and stereotypes are framed within the context of W.C. Handy's lyrics.

The importance of W.C. Handy's composition, "St. Louis Blues," cannot be overstated. It is the most recorded blues song of all time (almost 100 at the time of the film's production, and well over to 2200 re-

BLAZING SENSATION OVERNIGHT ON BWAY



White Hot Dramatic Show Stopper Leaves Em Cheering in the Aisles!

TWO REEL RIOT OPENING WEEK WITH "BULLDOG DRUMMOND" AT PUBLIX RIALTO, NEW YORK HELD OVER INDEFINITE

ST. LOUIS BLUES

. . . all dialog smash . . . with most stirring musical and vocal setting at the moment of moaning to press. . . .

From original song by W.C. Handy Directed by Dudley Murphy With Bessie Smith, famous Victor recording artist and host of negro singing and dancing artists.

Produced by R. C. A. Gramercy Studios Distributed by RKO Distributing Corp.

Radio PICTURES

An advertisement in the Sept. 4, 1929 edition of Variety touting St. Louis Blues as a "white hot show stopper." Courtesy Media History Digital Library.

cordings to date); it was also one of the first "cross-over hits," a song popularized and enjoyed by blacks and whites alike. The song is more than just a standard 12-bar blues since it contains an unusual 16-bar "Spanish tinge" Habanero interlude. (While this interlude is present in this performance, the "Spanish tinge" rhythm is not used.) The lyrics, which frame this film, are universal in terms of blues songs: the loss of one's lover to another.

Unfortunately, there are problems with the musical performance. While the combination of blues singer, jazz orchestra, and vocal choir is carefully crafted, and has precedent in blues recordings, the arrangement here may just be too complicated. The music reflects director Dudley Murphy's "vision" for the short, but the use of this choir, which may add a more "classical" feel to the production, does not quite fit the feel of a "blues vocal with orchestral accompaniment." Simply put, the choir is not needed from a musical point of view.

So what makes this film so essential? Why is it one of the “foundational films” in the canon of jazz and blues on film? First and foremost, this is the only known footage of the greatest of all classic blues singers, Bessie Smith. Bessie comes off as a force of nature, whose startling power is rivaled in 1920s jazz and blues only by Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet and Charley Patton. Bessie’s extended performance allows her to use all of her vocal trademarks: bent notes and blue notes; an ability to swoop to the higher registers and hit the note squarely; a broad sound that evokes pain and the human condition; a vocal timbre that recalls the sound of an open trumpet; growls and other guttural vocal devices. This is a commanding and definitive vocal performance indeed.

Second, this is the only film in which the Fletcher Henderson band, or at least a portion of it, appears on both soundtrack and screen. True, Fletcher is not there -- his place is taken at the piano by James P. Johnson -- but the rest of the band is either drawn from Fletcher’s band from the period, or are musicians who had played with him. The band is in fine form, and the instrumental sequence in the middle of the film, in which the band plays an accompaniment to dancing waiters and featured performer Jimmy Mordecai, is one of the finest examples of the Harlem sound of the late 1920s to be found on film.

The film is also important because it is one of the earliest to present images of black life, albeit stereotypical, in a film intended for both black and white audiences. What is missing, of course, and what makes the vision of the film so limiting, is that for decades to follow there would be so few films that showed other aspects of black culture ... black lawyers and doctors, black leaders, black homes and families, black appreciation of all aspects of culture and so forth. If such films had been produced in 1929 and in the years to follow, I suspect the stereotypes in this film would be less grating to us today.

Something needs to be said about Dudley Murphy’s fascination with African-American culture. In addition

to this film, Murphy’s filmography includes a follow up short for RKO, “Black and Tan” (1929), starring Duke Ellington and his Orchestra; “Emperor Jones” (1933), the justly famous feature film adaptation of Eugene O’Neill’s play, starring Paul Robeson; and three “Soundies” jukebox shorts from 1941 featuring Dorothy Dandridge, the Spirits of Rhythm, and others. Regarding his work on “St. Louis Blues,” author Susan Delson (“Dudley Murphy, Hollywood Wild Card,” University of Minnesota Press, 2006) notes: “His direction yielded relaxed, fluid performances by all three principals ... Murphy’s efforts to construct natural cinematic performances pushed him to integrate music and narrative as fully as possible.”

When all is said and done, this is an immensely important film despite its many flaws. First and foremost, Bessie Smith’s vocal performance and the accompaniment by the James P. Johnson band are stunning. And while there are a surprisingly large number of jazz films from 1929, few of them feature black artists. The next five years would bring an extraordinary number of black jazz and blues artists to the screen -- Mamie Smith, Noble Sissle, Don Redman, Eubie Blake, Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, more Duke Ellington -- yet “St. Louis Blues” serves as one of the foundations for all that follow.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Mark Cantor operates the Celluloid Improvisations Film Archive, one of the largest collections of jazz, blues and popular music on 16mm film worldwide. The Archive is concerned with preserving not only musical performance on film, but also information about the performances as well: who do we hear on soundtrack, who do we see on screen, who are the solo artists and so forth. Mr. Cantor regularly presents programs from the Archive, and contributes articles to magazines and institutions dealing with the history of jazz music. Films from the Archive have been seen in many documentaries, including Ken Burns’ “Jazz,” and the Academy Award-nominated “A Great Day in Harlem.”