

# “Crazy Blues”—Mamie Smith (1920)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by Ed Komara (guest post)\*



*Mamie Smith*



*Original label*



*Perry Bradford*

The African American newspaper “The Chicago Defender” in October 1916 expressed its certainty that “records of the Race’s great artists will be placed on the market” once the record companies realized how many African Americans owned Victrolas and other record players. During the next four years, some African American styles did appear on shellac, but performed by white musicians, including the Original Dixieland Jass Band who made the first commercial jazz records in 1917. The breakthrough record by an African American performer came in November 1920, with the release of Mamie Smith’s performance of “Crazy Blues” on OKeh Records.

What was a sensational hit for Mamie Smith that fall was, in truth, long in being developed in African American urban show culture, certainly back to the time of the “Defender’s” statement. The pianist on that record, Willie “The Lion” Smith, later remembered the tune as “an old bawdy song played in the sporting houses” titled “Baby, Get That Towel Wet” circulating before 1916, when the composer James P. Johnson adapted it for his song “Mama and Papa’s Blues.” Another composer, Perry Bradford, made use of the same tune for several songs for himself, namely “The Broken Hearted Blues” (1917), “The Wicked Blues” (aka “The Nervous Blues,” 1918, 1921), and “Harlem Blues” (1918). It was by the last title that Mamie Smith learned the song from Bradford in 1918, for a New York stage show called “The Maid of Harlem.” Smith’s success with the song encouraged Bradford to pester recording firms to record her, an African American singer, in the style of African American blues.

By this time, Mamie Smith (1883-1946) was already a hardy veteran of black entertainment of over 25 years. Born in Cincinnati, Ohio, she hit the road at age 10 as one of Four Dancing Mitchells. As a teenager, she joined the troupe The Smart Set as a chorus dancer, and her travels eventually landed her in Harlem, having made a successful transition from dancer to singer.

Perry Bradford (1895-1970) had a similar odyssey, beginning as an entertainer in a minstrel troupe in 1907 and arriving to New York in 1910 as a composer, pianist and hustler. The blues as a commercial song form appeared first on sheet music in 1912 (especially in several blues published that year by W.C. Handy), but its introduction on records as performed by black artists seemed to be lagging far behind. Bradford’s efforts to get Smith on wax led to an audition with Victor Records, during which she sang another Bradford song, “That Thing Called Love” to piano accompaniment, that led to nowhere.

Undeterred, Bradford got the ear of Fred Hager, the recording director for OKeh Records. Showing the executive the sheet music for his songs “That Thing Called Love” and “You Can’t

Keep A Good Man Down,” Bradford touted Mamie Smith as a singer who could “do more with those songs than a monkey can do with a peanut.” Whatever reservations Hager may have had in signing Smith--and in his job and situation, Hager could have had some, having already received some warnings from whites not to work with African American musicians--he took the plunge. He scheduled a recording session in February 1920, engaged an accompanying band (it isn't certain if it consisted of white or black musicians), brought in Mamie Smith, who sang “That Thing Called Love” and “You Can't Keep A Good Man Down.” The resulting release on Okeh 4113 were encouraging enough for Hager to record Smith in a blues for the follow-up session.

From here, the details become quite murky with the addition of pianist Willie “The Lion” Smith to the story. (We will refer to him as The Lion to distinguish him from Mamie; they were not related.) In his autobiography “Music On My Mind” (New York: Doubleday, 1964), The Lion claimed to have discovered Mamie through her then-husband, William “Sweet Singing Smitty” Smith. Furthermore, the Lion also claimed to have set up the Okeh session for Mamie through Ralph Peer, to have been the pianist during the recording of “Crazy Blues,” and that Bradford was nowhere to be seen that day at the studio.

The Lion's account would seem dubious if it were not for his presence at the piano in a publicity shot of Mamie Smith taken at the time. Still, his version of events are in conflict with what Bradford recounts in his own autobiography, “Born With The Blues” (New York: Oak, 1965). Still let it be said: that on August 10, 1920, Mamie Smith with a group of African American musicians recorded “Crazy Blues” (which was how “Harlem Blues” was retitled) and “It's Right Here For You,” and that fall it was released on Okeh 4169.

The importance of this record may be a bit lost on today's ears. Nowadays, we expect this blues record to proceed in the manner of a dance blues from Mississippi or Chicago, that is, to consist of a string of 12-measure blues choruses. But since Bradford wrote “Crazy Blues” as a theater piece for a stage singer, he embeds the blues choruses among non-blues verses. So during the course of the historic three-minute side, the first chorus is 16 measures long, the second is a 12 measure blues, the third another 16 measure structure, the fourth and fifth are also blues, and the sixth chorus ends with the 16-measure theme heard earlier. Everything about “Crazy Blues” is composed in both song structure and demeanor, but the controlled tempo does allow Mamie Smith some heartfelt moments during the last two choruses.

In and for its time, “Crazy Blues” was a hit, reportedly selling 75,000 copies during its first two months of release. Its long-term success gave Okeh plenty of financial capital to hold more blues sessions with Smith and other urban African American artists, igniting the women blues singers trend across the recording industry through the end of the 1920s. In one way, the success was so great, that publishers came forth to sue Perry Bradford for non-payment of royalties on the preceding publications of the “Crazy Blues” theme as “Broken Hearted Blues” and “Wicked Blues.”

The “Crazy Blues” record made Mamie Smith a national star, at least through the mid-1920s. In 1921, she broke off from Perry Bradford, informing him through a process server and her new boyfriend Ocie Wilson. She continued singing as a featured act in theaters through 1931, when she reportedly retired. She did return to performing, but on celluloid, and several of her appearances in films and “soundies” through 1942 survive. She died on August 16, 1946, poor enough to have been buried in a communal grave. Bradford outlived her by 24 years. In his “Born With The Blues,” written in his late 60s, Bradford made the “Crazy Blues” session the central event of his life.

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