

“Down Hearted Blues”—Bessie Smith (1923)

Added to the National Registry: 2002

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Bessie Smith



Original label

Bessie Smith was born in 1894. She died, at age 43, in 1937. Between those dates she recorded 150 songs and earned the moniker “The Empress of the Blues.” While her style has since been often emulated, it has never been topped. And while others may have gone on to sell more records, few can touch her influence.

If the old adage goes that you have to have had the blues to sing the blues, then Bessie Smith earned the right. She was born into abject poverty in Chattanooga, Tennessee, one of seven children of a minister/laborer father. Her mother died when Bessie was eight, and not long after, she and her brother began busking (playing music for donations) on the streets of Chattanooga to make money for the family. Though she began her career dancing, soon Bessie turned more to singing. At age 16, her brother Clarence, already a musician, got her an audition with the traveling Moses Stokes Company and Smith soon joined up going on to play carnivals, nightclubs and tent shows. While with Stokes, Smith made the acquaintance of another soon-to-be blues legend: Ma Rainey. Despite rumors of rivalry, the two women actually became lifelong friends as they traveled and performed together across the South and up and down the Eastern Seaboard.

Sometime in the early 1920s (exact dates differ), in an obscure club in Selma, Alabama, Smith was heard by Frank Walker, an A&R man for Columbia Records. Impressed, he signed her to a recording contract. Smith recorded her first sides for Columbia in February of 1923.

Smith entered the recording industry just as both blues recordings and so-called “race records” were entering a period of vogue. “Down Hearted Blues” was recorded in the fertile year of 1923. It was written by two female songwriters and blues artists, Alberta Hunter and Lovie Austin. Both women had notable musical careers. Hunter (1895-1984) wrote, toured and performed in the 1920s and enjoyed a major comeback in the 1970s when she was in her 80s. Austin, a writer and pianist, played on the albums of Ethel Waters, Ma Rainey and Ida Cox. Mary Lou Williams has noted her as her greatest influence.

As a song, “Down Hearted Blues” wears its blues on its sleeve. Though the song’s accompanying piano—the recording’s sole instrument—is light, even lilting, the song’s lyrics are not ambiguous. It is classic blues:

*Gee, but it's hard to love someone when that someone don't love you!
I'm so disgusted, heart-broken, too; I've got those down hearted blues;
Once I was crazy 'bout a man; he mistreated me all the time,
The next man I get has got to promise me to be mine, all mine!*

*Trouble, trouble, I've had it all my days,
Trouble, trouble, I've had it all my days.*

In his book “Jazz Singing: America’s Greatest Voices from Bessie Smith to Bebop and Beyond,” author Will Friedwald deconstructs Smith signature style:

Smith sings with a quality of harshness and at the same time with great passion but never with irony or sarcasm. With Smith, the two seemingly incongruous attitudes are compatible, a sort of tender invective. Smith sings about love without a trace of sentiment, and of sex without guilt. She has an amazingly realistic attitude toward life and love, and even in moments of heightened, not to say suicidal, despondency has a sober, realistic view of life, devoid of self pity.

There is a fullness and robustness to Smith’s singing, even in the most downtrodden of lyrics, a quality that one later sees replicated in the work of Billie Holiday and Etta James.

Musician and music critic John Hammond once said of Smith, “To my way of thinking, Bessie Smith was the greatest artist American jazz every produced; in fact, I’m not sure that her art did not reach beyond the limits of ‘jazz.’ She was one of those rare beings, a completely integrated artist capable of projecting her whole personality into her music.”

Bessie Smith was a big girl who became a big woman; she stood five feet, nine inches tall and weighed over 200 pounds. She was known to be rough and forceful and a little bit crude. Legends abound: that she once beat her husband’s mistress unconscious on the streets of Harlem, that she once ordered a group of Klansmen picketing her concert to pack up and leave (and they did). Smith had voracious appetites—for music, alcohol and sex. In regard to the latter, throughout her life, she often openly carried on various tumultuous, far from discrete affairs with members of both sexes. Smith also had a taste for luxury and high-living. At the height of her popularity, she traveled the nation in her own custom-build railway car.

If anything rivaled Smith’s lust for life, it was her musical output. There is not a classic blues song or standard of the era that she did not cover or originate. Some of her recordings include: “St. Louis Blues,” “I Need a Little Sugar in My Bowl,” “Tain’t Nobody’s Business If I Do,” “Nobody Knows When You’re Down and Out,” “After You’re Gone,” “I Ain’t Got Nobody,” “You’ve Got to Give Me Some,” “Baby Won’t You Please Come Home,” “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” “Tea for Two,” “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” and numerous others. Though her recording career was short—only 14 years—she recorded close to 200 songs, some written herself, and many of them with the accompaniment of some of the best musicians in the business. Some of her sidemen over the years included: Louis Armstrong, Joe Smith, Don Redman, James P. Johnson, Charlie Green and Fletcher Henderson.

In 1929, Smith toured in her own vaudeville show, “Midnight Steppers,” and in 1933, she was featured in the 17-minute Warner Brothers short subject “St. Louis Blues,” where she played a wronged woman.

But, by the beginning of the 1930s, the Jazz Age was ebbing to an end. And Smith acutely felt its downturn. That change in musical tastes, along with her ongoing problem with alcohol, spelled new and difficult years for the Empress. She was still recording and touring, and hoping for a comeback, when died from injuries incurred in a car accident in 1937.

As was in keeping with her life, Smith’s funeral was lavish. Over 10,000 are reported to have attended the services in Philadelphia. Still, 30 years after her death, her grave remained unmarked. That is, until long-time admirer Janis Joplin helped purchase a headstone. On it is inscribed: “The Greatest Blues Singer in the World Will Never Stop Singing.”

Cary O'Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books "June Cleaver Was a Feminist!" (2014) and "Women Pioneers in Television" (1997). He also served as assistant editor of "The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2009) and "The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2010).