

Bessie Smith

Empress of the Blues



Bessie Smith



- Bessie Smith was born in April 15, 1894 Chattanooga, Tennessee, U.S.

- And she died in a car accident on September 26, 1937 (aged 43) Clarksdale, Mississippi, U.S.

Early Tragedy



- ★ Bessie Smith was born into poverty in Chattanooga, Tennessee, one of seven children of William and Laura Smith.
- ★ Her father was a Baptist minister and a laborer. Her father died soon after her birth and her mother and two of her brothers died by the time she was eight or nine.
- ★ An older sister raised her and her siblings. Did not go to school. Instead sang for money on street corners at an early age, accompanied on guitar by Andrew, her younger brother.

Early Career



Ma Rainey - 1917

- ★ At age eighteen Smith joined a traveling minstrel show. The minstrel show (a show based on African American music and humor) circuit was a difficult life.
- ★ Late hours, low pay, gambling, fighting, and abusing alcohol and drugs were commonplace. But Smith's voice was remarkable, filling the largest hall without amplification (the expansion of sound) and reaching out to each listener in beautiful, earthy tones.
- ★ Exposed to Ma Rainey, who also worked on the show. Rainey probably did not teach Smith to sing, but Smith was influenced by her.

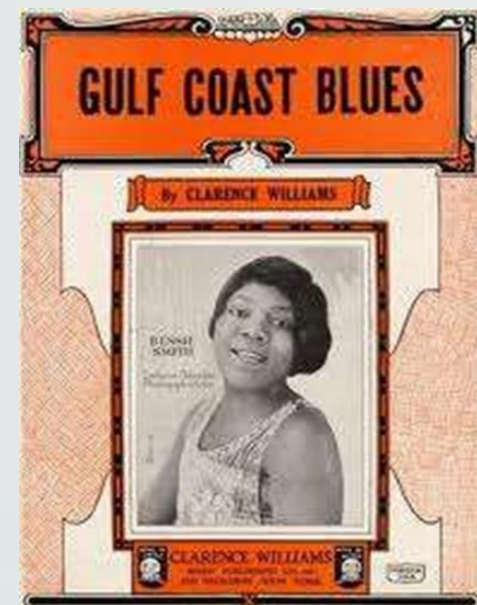
Rainey's Influence



- Rainey was an already established vaudeville singer who had spent years on the road working in a male dominated industry.
- She taught Bessie how to navigate this world.
- There is also evidence that they were linked romantically. Bessie was openly bisexual.
- Rainey's singing style also influenced Bessie
 - Not so much her vocal qualities, but how to work a stage and perform.

Recording Artist

- Prior to the 1920's, it was assumed that there was no market for black female artists. But the success of the song "Crazy Blues" by Mamie Smith (no relation) had record producers scrambling to find more artists to record.
- Her first important recording is the song "Downhearted Blues" in 1923.
- This song was in a collection called *Gulf Coast Blues*. The collection sold over 8000,000 copies in six months and made Bessie the first superstar Blues singer.



The Empress



- Pivotal figure in not only music, but as one with great influence in a changing society.

- Musically: the bridge from “down home” or rural blues to a more sophisticated urban form.

- Within Society: an iconic figure of the great migration of rural African-Americans of the south to northern cities.

- Her blues were not just sorrowful, but also pointed out injustices



Bessie's royal image came not only from her larger than life personality and powerful voice. It also took some clever promotion from her record company and the exposure from the emerging commercial radio stations of 1920's.

“I believe there are only two truly regal women in the world, my mother (the queen) and Bessie Smith.” - Prince of Wales

“Whatever pathos there is in the world, whatever sadness she had, was brought out in her singing-and the audience knew it and responded to it.” - Frank Schiffman, owner of the Apollo theater





Commercial radio boomed in the 1920's:

- Radio was limited during World War I
- It became easier to pick up cheap radio sets
- Radios doubled as pieces of furniture and soon replaced the parlor piano

Much like today, radio hosts played records live over the air and included occasional live performances

The radio reached an incredibly broad audience. Bessie could be heard crying the blues from the homes of white middle class neighborhoods.

Soon, Bessie would be giving separate shows to white only audiences and she did so gladly, for the ticket sales and salaries were increased for such occasions.



Through records and radio, Bessie became the foremost lady blues singer and transitional icon between old time blues (Ma Rainey) and a more sophisticated form of modern blues.



Both started recording in 1923, but Bessie's more urban style contained a depth which African-American music had not known before.

Singing Style



- Bessie's new urban style:
1. Her voice displayed a more sophisticated phrasing not previously known
 2. She anticipated chords
 3. Her tone was of a richer variety.
 4. The lyrical content of her songs contained an abundance of metaphors
 5. Her rhythmic treatment of tunes, especially with the use of triplets in duple meter, exhibited a more jazzy than bluesy feeling.

In the following song Graveyard Dream Blues, see if you can pick out these techniques.

Seen here in the movie St. Louis Blues from 1929, Bessie sings a song by the same name composed by W.C. Handy. This is a moment in history where the crash of the stock market and Bessie's popularity come together. This is the only video of Smith performing.



- Bessie continued to make good money and toured throughout the 1920's, but had transitioned to a more modern and urban sound. Musicians that followed her took up where she left off and progressed the form even further.
- Duke Ellington and Count Basie used Bessie's techniques and placed them in a much more rich and complex setting. The big band and swing era would sweep the nation.





- The Depression changed what the nation wanted to listen to.
- The big beat of the swing bands covered up the reality of the depression.
- Bessie would try and adjust to the changes. Radio and records had started Bessie on her ride and they contributed to her diminished stature as the Empress.
- In 1933, John Henry Hammond, who also mentored Billie Holiday, asked Smith to record four sides for Okeh (which had been acquired by Columbia Records in 1925). He claimed to have found her in semi-obscurity, "working as a hostess in a speakeasy on Ridge Avenue in Philadelphia."

In 1937, Bessie Smith died in an automobile accident.

She was to become one of many tortured souls whose light burned bright and fast. That flame still can be seen when we listen to her music and share her experience.



Significance

- The emerging race record and commercial radio of the 1920's that Bessie Smith was a part of really made a mark on American culture.
- They ushered in the Jazz Age. Many artists from differing backgrounds would progress forward with elements of what Bessie had created.
- She elevated blues singing from the old-fashioned vaudeville style of the Ma Rainey days, to a more sophisticated style of music that dealt with social and political issues.
- She profoundly influenced the next generation of Blues and Jazz singers like Billie Holiday.

