



Smith, Bessie (1894-1937)

by Carla Williams

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"Empress of the Blues" is the regal title rightly bestowed upon Bessie Smith, whose history has been filled with persistent, colorful legends. Gifted with a powerful voice and sophisticated musical artistry, she conducted her life by her own set of rules and had affairs with both men and women.

Born in severe poverty, probably on April 15, 1894, in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Smith became the undisputed favorite blues singer of ticket and record buyers alike throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Specializing in songs of heartbreak, violence, and longing, her vocalization is characterized by haunting expressivity, perfect phrasing, and a superb sense of timing.

Smith was reared by a sister, Viola, but her oldest brother, Clarence, had the most influence on her. He encouraged Bessie to learn how to sing and dance. By the time she was nine years old, she was singing on Chattanooga street corners; and by the time she was a teenager she had joined veteran blues singer Gertrude "Ma" Rainey in the Moses Stokes traveling show, which operated in tent shows throughout the South.

Smith made her first recordings in 1923, including her rendition of Alberta Hunter's "Down-Hearted Blues," which sold 780,000 copies in less than six months, solidifying the regal status that she had earned through performing.

Smith mostly performed for all-Black audiences and occasionally all-white audiences in the South, but her 160 known recordings reached fans all over the world and eventually made her wealthy. Although her career began to wane somewhat during the Great Depression and her longtime contract with Columbia records was terminated in 1931, Smith never lost her fame or her loyal following on the road.

Even though she was born a Black woman in the Jim Crow South, Smith managed to conduct her life on her own terms. By nearly all accounts she was violent, foul-mouthed, a heavy drinker, and sexually promiscuous. However, her extraordinary talent and subsequent wealth afforded her some latitude in these regards. She was also notoriously stingy with her touring company, often leaving them stranded without pay in the midst of a tour.

Like several notable women blues singers, Smith often preferred the company of women. Her relationships included a volatile, near-fatal affair in 1926 with chorus girl Lillian Simpson.

Smith was said to have a voracious appetite for both sex and alcohol that she regularly and openly indulged. Although homosexuality is often referred to in blues lyrics and is a recognizable theme for many listeners, Smith's most explicit reference to homosexuality is in her composition "Foolish Man Blues." Somewhat surprisingly, it is rather condemning:



Bessie Smith in 1936.
Photograph by Carl van Vechten, February 3, 1936.
Library of Congress
Prints and Photographs
Division.

There's two things got me puzzled, there's two things I can't understand
That's a mannish actin' woman and a skippin', twistin' woman acting man.

Despite her numerous affairs with both men and women, Smith married Jack Gee in June 1923. Theirs was a tumultuous union rife with abuse and infidelity; and although they adopted a son three years later, Gee forced his separation from Smith, and his identity was unknown to her biographers until the 1970s.

Smith and Gee finally separated in 1929 but never divorced. Thus, Gee was able to claim sole rights to Smith's considerable estate following her untimely death on September 26, 1937, as a result of injuries sustained in a car accident on a lonely Southern highway.

Mystery and legend surround Smith's death. The often-repeated story, based on an article by John Hammond in *Downbeat* magazine and perpetuated in Edward Albee's play *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1960), is that she was denied care because she was Black and subsequently died from non-life-threatening injuries.

This account is untrue and was almost immediately corrected. Yet it persists because the aura of racial injustice surrounding the accident is entirely believable and the story is as suitably tragic as Smith's premature death.

Smith's funeral was attended by thousands of mourners paying their respects, yet her grave remained unmarked from 1937 until 1970, when Juanita Green, a Philadelphia woman, aided by a donation from singer Janis Joplin, paid for a gravestone.

(As a footnote, the former emergency room of the colored hospital in Clarksdale, Mississippi, where Smith is believed to have died, is now Room 2 of the Riverside Hotel; guests may request to sleep in Smith's room, though for no more than one night.)

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