



BY DONNA HERULA

# Bessie Smith - Empress of the Blues

*Bessie Smith was the biggest blues star of the 1920's and 1930's. She was so popular that she was known as "The Empress of the Blues". Her singing was a major influence on blues, jazz and rock and roll singers that followed her, including Aretha Franklin and Janis Joplin.*

Bessie was the highest paid black entertainer of her time, commanding over \$2,000 a week. (In 2017, this would be equivalent to \$28,000 a week.) Her fans related to her songs about the hardships between men and women, something Bessie knew well from her own relationships – including her marriage. Her voice was warm and precise, and so strong that it could be heard clearly through an entire theater without a microphone. Bessie had incredible control of intonation and knew how to use her voice to evoke deep emotion from her audience.

Bessie was graceful and confident, standing almost 6 feet tall at about 200 pounds. On stage, she wore

on the streets with her guitar playing brother, Andrew, to earn money.

When Bessie was 17 years old, her brother, Clarence, got her an audition to the Moses Stokes' Traveling Show, where he had been working as a comedian and a dancer for about 8 years. Bessie was hired as a dancer and began her professional entertainment career.

Soon after, Bessie toured with blues star Ma Rainey in Fat Chappelle's Rabbit Foot Minstrels tent where Ma showed Bessie the ropes of becoming a successful blues entertainer. Ma was about 8-12 years older than Bessie (depending on the source used for the year of Ma's birth). The two women began singing together, wrote a few songs together and developed a strong bond that lasted throughout Bessie's career.

Bessie moved to Atlanta and was a regular performer at a theater called "81" where she produced her own shows and took them on the road. She was also a regular singer

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colorful dresses made of satin, fringed shawls, and jeweled hats with feathers, beads or pearls to match her clothes. Personally, Bessie was assertive and enjoyed a good time, which many times included alcohol. She recorded nearly 160 songs and wrote more than 25 in her lifetime, including songs with the greatest musicians like Louis Armstrong.

Bessie is one of the few early blues stars that was recorded on film. The 15-minute uncut version of "St. Louis Blues" from 1929 is available on YouTube, including a sketch intro before Bessie sings.

## ***Trials of Her Early Days***

Bessie was born in a rundown, one-room cabin in Chattanooga, Tennessee on April 15, 1894. Her father, William Smith, was a part-time Baptist preacher who died shortly after she was born. Both her mother, Laura, and one of her brothers died by the time that Bessie was 9 years old, leaving her and her three sisters and two brothers orphans.

Bessie, the youngest child, and her siblings learned to be resourceful in order to survive. Her oldest sister, Viola, ran a small laundry business to help support the family. Young Bessie took to singing and dancing

at the Standard and Dunbar Theaters in Philadelphia and later at the Paradise Gardens, a resort in Atlantic City, NJ.

## ***Recording Jitters to Blues Star***

In 1920, Mamie Smith (no relation to Bessie) was the first female African American to record a blues song, called "Crazy Blues." With the success of this record, record producers rushed to record other African-American blues singers and promote these "race records" to the Black community.

At this time, Bessie was very popular and was eager to record. However, several record companies she auditioned for turned her down, including Okeh Records and Harry Pace's Black Swan Records. Okeh Records told her they wanted a smoother pop singer sound and felt Bessie's voice was too rough and powerful.

Fortunately for us, Bessie was signed with Columbia Records in 1923. On the first day of the recording session, Bessie was very nervous, as most recording artists can understand. She arrived with her pianist, Clarence Williams, on February 15, 1923. She was asked to sing in a huge horn, similar to a giant version of an old Victrola – with the recording engineer behind a curtain. There were no microphones and the recording was totally acoustic,



with the volume depending on the strength of the singers' voice, which was no problem for Bessie.

Bessie attempted to make a good recording eleven times that first day, but Frank Walker, from Columbia records, sent her home and rescheduled the recording session to the next day. On her third try on the second day, Bessie recorded her first "side" called "Downhearted Blues." That record (or 78) sold over 780,000 copies in 6 months after it was released in June of 1923. Bessie released five other records around this time and all were great successes. This increased the number of fans coming to her live performances as well.

Bessie's first contract with Columbia paid Bessie \$125 per releasable recording. But in April 1923, her new 8-year contract gave her \$1,500 up front plus increased the amount paid for each record to \$150. Between 1923 and 1931, Bessie recorded 160 songs and became one of Columbia's best-selling artists. Columbia promoted and advertised her work but did not pay her royalties.

One of Bessie's best-selling songs was a self-written one called "Backwater Blues" about the flooding of the Ohio River. Additionally she and Louis Armstrong recorded together three times, and created nine hit records including the songs "St. Louis Blues" and "You've Been a Good Old Wagon."

Bessie earned as much as \$2,000 or more a week from her live performances at that time. A generous person, Bessie sent a lot of her earnings to her sister Viola and also bought her sisters and their children a house in Philadelphia, near her own house.

She also bought a 78 foot long yellow railroad car with her name painted on the side in green lettering. It had 7



six members of the KKK trying to pull out some of the stakes holding up the tent. When Bessie heard the KKK was trying to disrupt her concert by collapsing the tent, she became furious.

After a group of stagehands refused to get rid of the Klansmen, Bessie charged outside and confronted the Klan. According to author Chis Albertson, she shouted, "What do you think you're doing?" as she shook her fist

*"One of her musicians went outside of the tent for some air. He came upon six members of the KKK trying to pull out some of the stakes holding up the tent."*

staterooms, each one sleeping up to 4 people. It also had a kitchen, bathroom and running hot and cold water. Thirty-five people could also sleep on the lower level. This way, the crew and all 40+ musicians, dancers and comedians could travel together.

Bessie made her last record with John Hammond in 1933 for the Okeh Record Company. Hammond had been a Bessie Smith fan since childhood. Of the four songs recorded, one of the best known was "Gimme a Pigfoot."

#### ***Bessie Scares Off the KKK***

One hot evening in July 1927, Bessie was performing at a tent show in Concord, North Carolina. One of her musicians went outside of the tent for some air. He came upon

at them, putting the other hand on her hips. "I'll get the entire tent out here if I have to," she yelled. "You just pick up them sheets and run!"

At first the Klansman were too shocked to move, but after Bessie shouted more obscenities, they turned around and fled into the night.

#### ***Love and Marriage***

Bessie was married twice and had a number of love relationships. In 1920, Bessie married Earl Love, but he unfortunately passed away a year or two after they married. Little is known about Bessie's relationship with her first husband.

John "Jack" Gee, a good looking security guard, saw her first in Atlantic City and then at Horah's Cabaret in Philadelphia in 1922. On their first date, Jack got shot after chasing a robber and ended up in the hospital for five weeks. After Bessie visited him in the hospital every day, Bessie and Jack fell in love and Jack moved in with Bessie after he was released. Bessie and Jack were married on June 7, 1923.

Their marriage was characterized by high drama, bad tempers, binge drinking and affairs on both sides. At times, Jack was physically abusive towards Bessie. Like so many abused women, Bessie broke up with her husband several times, but then would get back together with him.

Shortly before they married, Jack kindly pawned his watch and other items to buy Bessie an attractive dress for her recording session with Columbia. But after they were married and she became a greater success, Bessie spent a lot of time traveling on the road without her

years old. There was controversy after Bessie's death about her dying as a result of not being admitted to a white-only hospital, but this rumor was proven to be false.

### ***Remembering Bessie***

On Sunday, October 3 and Monday, October 4, 1937, approximately twenty thousand fans and mourners paid their respects walking past Bessie's gold trimmed, velvet-lined casket. After an estimated ten thousand people visited on Sunday, October 3rd, the casket had to be moved to a different location the next day to better accommodate thousands of more visitors. Thirty-nine cars were in her funeral procession and she was laid to rest at Mount Lawn Cemetery in Sharon Hill, Pennsylvania (near Philadelphia).

For nearly 37 years, Bessie's grave was unmarked. After a woman named Barbara Muldow complained to the Philadelphia newspaper, Juanita Green, from the NAACP, and Janis Joplin, the blues-rock singer, each gave half

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husband, who continued to work as a security guard. To spend more time with her, Jack quit his job. But with her increased stardom, continued time apart, and admiring, doting fans came frequent jealous quarrels. Jack also believed that he should be managing the money that Bessie made – although many times, he used the money to buy fancy clothes and luxury items for himself. In 1926, the couple adopted a boy from a friend in trouble, that they named Jack Jr.

### ***Changing Times***

In 1931, Columbia decided not to re-sign a contract with Bessie due to a decline in blues record sales. However, Bessie continued to be popular and bring in large audiences wherever she performed. By 1933, she added more popular music, jazz and Broadway songs into her performances. With amazing stage presence and a broadened range of musical styles, she was a legend even with the young jazz players. Lionel Hampton recalled, "She was a star. I'm convinced that if she had lived, she would have been right up there with the rest of us in the swing music."

### ***Early Death***

At about 3am on September 26, 1937, Bessie Smith and her manager and friend, Richard Morgan, got into a car accident while driving along Route 61 near Clarksdale, after a show in Memphis, TN. Richard, the driver, was unharmed, but Bessie lost a lot of blood and died at Clarksdale's Afro-American Hospital. She was only 43

the money to purchase a tombstone. Unfortunately, Janis Joplin died two months after the tombstone was placed. Bessie's gravestone read:

The Greatest Blues Singer  
in the World Will Never Stop Singing  
Bessie Smith  
1895-1937

Bessie was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame in 1980 and into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1989. She continues to influence countless blues, jazz, pop and rock singers worldwide. She will be remembered for her amazing voice, self-confidence and for bringing blues music to generations of music lovers.



Donna Herula is a blues singer and slide guitarist that regularly plays at Buddy Guy's Legends. She has also been influenced by Bessie Smith's music.  
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