

Hall of Fame Winner Bessie Smith:

EMPRESS OF THE BLUES

by dan morgenstern

A PLACE FOR Bessie Smith, "The Empress of the Blues," in *Down Beat's* Hall of Fame seems long overdue, but the award has come at a time that is historically appropriate. Next month—on Sept. 26—the greatest of all blues singers will be dead for 30 years.

Her voice, however, has not been stilled. She left behind a legacy of 158 sides, recorded between 1923 and 1933, and 48 of these have been in constant circulation (on Columbia's four-record *The Bessie Smith Story*) since the early days of the 12-inch LP.

Bessie Smith's magnificent voice, majestic phrasing, clear and unaffected diction, and incomparable rhythmic sureness have had a far-reaching influence on the development of jazz singing.

She was an inspiration to countless singers and musicians who worked with her, saw her perform, or heard her voice on some of the 8,000,000 to 10,000,000 records she sold during her peak years.

Young Billie Holiday has told of running errands for the girls at a "house" in her Baltimore neighborhood, just so she could hear Bessie's records on the phonograph in the parlor; throughout her life, Lady Day was quick to mention Bessie as her prime influence—along with Louis Armstrong.

Armstrong himself, who teamed up with Bessie on some of her greatest records, has paid her high tribute: "She used to thrill me at all times, the way she could phrase a note with a certain something in her voice no other blues singer could get. She had music in her soul and felt everything she did. Her sincerity with her music was an inspiration."

Bix Beiderbecke, enraptured, thrust his week's pay envelope on her so she would continue singing after her set had ended at a south-side Chicago night spot. Young Mezz Mezzrow, transfixed by his first in-person encounter with Bessie's art, timidly requested *Cemetery Blues*, his favorite among her records. The singer, he relates in his autobiography, *Really the Blues*, rumbled his hair, smiled, and said: "Son, what are you studying cemeteries for? You should be out in the park

with some cute little chick." But she sang his request.

Bessie Smith was born into abject poverty in Chattanooga, Tenn., on April 15, 1894. (The exact year of her birth is in doubt; in a 1936 interview, she gave it as 1897, but it is likely that she was exercising her feminine prerogative.)

Her early life is obscure. She claimed to have won a state roller-skating championship at the age of 11, only a week or so after acquiring her first pair of skates. When she was still in her teens, she had begun to sing, dance, and act, and she was already a professional entertainer when Ma Rainey's Rabbit Foot Minstrels passed through her home town.

Ma Rainey, Bessie's senior by about 10 years, was the greatest of the pioneer female blues singers. She was sufficiently impressed by young Bessie to find a place for her in the show, and thus began a period of travel with various road companies, tent shows, and carnivals throughout the southern states.

When not on the road, Bessie worked in cabarets, in towns large and small. In 1917, Frank Walker, later to become recording director for Columbia, heard her sing in a small dive in Selma, Ala., and the memory lingered.

SIX YEARS later, Walker asked Clarence Williams—composer, pianist, publisher, talent agent, and, in today's terminology, a&r man—to find Bessie so he could record her. Williams didn't have much trouble locating the singer. By this time, she had acquired a considerable reputation with Negro audiences and was living in Philadelphia.

Williams himself had tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade OKeh records to sign Bessie two years before, when she was in New York. An audition record, with Sidney Bechet and Bubber Miley in the accompanying group, was made but rejected as "too strange."

Walker, however, knew better. Bessie's first recording session, on Feb. 17, 1923, produced *Down-Hearted Blues*, which, though a "cover" for recordings made by successful singers on other labels, sold

780,000 copies. By the end of her first year as a recording artist, Bessie became a sensation.

The finest jazz musicians of the day soon were accompanying her on records. She had the best rapport with cornetist Joe Smith, whose pure, singing tone and exquisite responsorial phrases made perfect foil for her voice. On her more humorous and brash pieces, trombonist Charlie Green's barrelhouse comments stood out, and when she was working with just a piano, James P. Johnson had no peers.

Though the records made and spread her fame, Bessie spent most of her time performing before audiences. Now, she commanded top salaries, toured with the best Negro vaudeville companies or her own shows, and no longer just in the South.

"Bessie Smith was a fabulous deal to watch," Danny Barker recalled in *How I Got Me Talking to You*. "She dominated the stage. You didn't turn your head when she went on. You didn't read a newspaper. You just watched Bessie. She just upstaged you. When she was performing, you could hear a pin drop."

She had nothing but disdain for the microphone when this innovation was introduced. She'd push it aside with a contemptuous gesture and let the natural sound of her voice fill the biggest hall. Drummers, too, she found superfluous. She set the beat, and kept it rock-steady. Not a single record she made includes a drummer in the supporting ensemble. "I don't want to be a slave to a drummer," she is reported to have said.

BESSIE'S PERSONAL life was no bed of roses. A big, beautiful woman with a statuesque figure, she had appetites to match her physique. She had early acquired the habit of drinking and favored gin, which she could consume in impressive quantities. (There are two blues by Bessie dealing with this aspect of her life, *Me and My Gin* and *The Gin House Blues*.)

When she began to make big money, she spent it readily, some on herself and

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hit from behind by another vehicle), and an ambulance took the injured singer to Clarksdale, where she was operated on, but died shortly after noon.

LEGEND HAS IT that Bessie Smith need not have died; that precious time was lost because she was refused treatment at a white hospital. Research has revealed, however, that this is not true. Bessie's life and death were tragic enough without this added touch perpetuated in Edward Albee's play, *The Death of Bessie Smith*.

Ironically, at the time of her death Bessie's art had begun to be rediscovered by the small growing number of jazz and folk music enthusiasts. John Hammond, who had arranged for and supervised her last recording session in November, 1933, had been about to bring Bessie to New York to record again.

Bessie Smith's genius was the product of American Negro culture, and during her lifetime, it was appreciated, with few exceptions, only by her own people. Since then, however, her fame has spread throughout the world.

As recently as 1958, a rash of Bessie Smith tributes appeared on record. Singers Dinah Washington, Juanita Hall, Lavern Baker, and Ronnie Gilbert (of the *Weavers*) all made albums of the songs she had made famous; in some cases accompanied by musicians who had worked with Bessie herself.

Periodically, announcements are made of plans for a Bessie Smith film biography (the latest of these names Della Reese as the star). None has materialized, and while the story material has great potential, it is difficult to imagine any singer capable of filling the role.

The only comparable voice to appear since Bessie's death is that of Mahalia Jackson (who readily admits to having been inspired by Bessie). But the great gospel singer's religious convictions preclude her taking on such a role.

Bessie Smith's voice lives on. Among the recordings currently available are some of her most beautiful (*Reckless Blues, Cold in Hand, St. Louis Blues, Baby Doll, On Revival Day, Backwater Blues, Poor Man's Blues, Young Woman's Blues*, and scores of other masterpieces). Currently, Columbia is preparing a complete reissue project, to consist of 10 albums carefully remastered.

Though she was the greatest of blues singers, she was by no means only that. Such songs as *Baby, Have Pity on Me; Need a Little Sugar in my Bowl; and Do Your Duty* are not blues, and she sings them superbly. It would be more accurate to say that she was the greatest female jazz singer the art has produced.

And maybe more. John Hammond summed it up shortly after Bessie's untimely death:

"To my way of thinking, Bessie Smith was the greatest artist American jazz ever produced; in fact, I'm not sure her art did not reach beyond the limits of the term 'jazz'. She was one of those rare beings—a completely integrated artist capable of projecting her whole personality into music." 

her husband-manager, but more on her family. Even while she had been eking out a living in traveling carnivals, Bessie had been sending money home to her three sisters and three brothers.

When the good times began, Miss Smith sent for her relatives and set them up in Philadelphia. She opened a restaurant for her oldest sister, which soon went under. She was generous to a fault with friends and co-workers.

The year 1929 began as a good one for Bessie. She starred in her own traveling show, *Midnight Steppers*; she made her only motion picture appearance, in a remarkable short, *St. Louis Blues*—this 10-minute glimpse of her demonstrates what a remarkable actress she was and what she might have achieved in a different society—and made one of her greatest records, *Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out*.

The song was prophetic. In October, the stock market crashed, and the great depression was under way. Among its first victims, of course, were the poor, and this also those who provided their entertainment. Negro show business was nearly

wiped out; the record industry in general, and "race" records in particular were badly hit. And there was no place for Bessie in the growing radio field.

But though the big time was over, Bessie was nothing if not a trouper, and she continued to work. Her declining years have been pictured as a kind of lower depth, but the facts do not bear this out. Singer Victoria Spivey, who knew Bessie well, has said she wasn't badly off during the last years preceding her death, though it is true that she had to return to the grind of traveling shows on the southern circuit, between somewhat better engagements in the North.

It was on such a southern tour, with a show called *Broadway Rastus*, one Sunday morning, that the car in which Bessie was riding plowed into a panel truck in the village of Coahoma, Miss.

She was badly injured—one arm almost torn from its socket, bruises on head and face, and serious internal injuries. The nearest hospital was in Clarksdale. A doctor provided on-the-spot first aid (he had been about to transport Bessie to the hospital in his car when it was