

CLASSIC BLUES

Recordings of vocal blues began with Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" in 1920, three years after the first jazz recordings were made by the Original Dixieland Jass (*sic*) Band, a typically earnest group of white musicians who found themselves "pioneering" a well-established black musical form. The surprise success of "Crazy Blues" alerted the still-young recording industry to the existence of a large black audience, or "race market," eager for blues recordings. Mindful of the popular styles of the day, the first blues recordings were a mixture of vaudevillian novelties and jazz arrangements, and nearly all were recorded by female singers. It would be many years before anyone thought to record the rough rural blues of the Mississippi Delta. In the meantime, the "classic blues" of the twenties brought the blues to a wide audience and even gave it an aura of glamour and speakeasy class.

The early blues queens, including Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Alberta Hunter, Victoria Spivey, Sippie Wallace, Edith Wilson, Clara Smith, Trixie Smith and Memphis Minnie, hailed from the South and worked their way around the country on the tent show and black theater circuits. The spreading jazz boom brought them into the white clubs and cabarets of the North, backed by the hottest pianists and jazz bands of the time. Their material ranged from popular Tin Pan Alley "blues" to expressive laments, with plenty of sexual references peppering their unapologetic toughness. Just as the blues gave voice to men's sufferings in life and love, the female blues singers communicated these harsh realities along with the extra measure of hardship they faced as women, and used the blues to express feelings that were otherwise not condoned in "polite" society.

You never get nothing by being an angel child,
You'd better change your way an' get real wild.
I wanta' tell you something, I wouldn't tell no lie,
Wild women are the only kind that ever get by.
Wild women don't worry, Wild women don't have the blues.
- Ida Cox, "Wild Women Don't Have the Blues" (1924)

Bessie Smith

Bessie Smith gave classic blues a deeply personal voice and raised blues singing to the level of an art. Smith was born in 1894 in Chattanooga, Tennessee. She "apprenticed" with Ma Rainey in a traveling troupe and was a veteran performer by the time she made her first record in 1923, "Down Hearted Blues" ("I never loved but three men in my life: my father, my brother, and the man that wrecked my life"). The "Empress of the Blues" ruled through the 1920's and became the measure by which all other blues singers were judged.

Smith was raised in dire poverty and was well-acquainted with physical and emotional suffering throughout her life. The inner torment that drove her to bad relationships and bad habits also infused her best blues with an intensely felt emotion. Her 1925 version of W.C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues" is one of her best-known recordings, featuring sublimely sorrowful singing and an inspired call-and-response between Bessie's growling, brassy voice and Louis Armstrong's trumpet.

Smith's career fell into a steep decline during the Depression years. She died in a car crash in 1937 near Clarksdale, Mississippi, and was buried in an unmarked grave in

Philadelphia. Smith is still considered one of the finest singers of any style ever recorded, and her fusion of technique and emotion has only rarely been matched. The tradition of strong female presences which she exemplified continued through a line of great jazz, gospel, rhythm & blues and soul singers, such as Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Dinah Washington, Mahalia Jackson, Marion Williams, Ruth Brown, Etta James and Aretha Franklin. A similarly bold white female artist did not emerge until a young singer from Texas modeled herself (in too many ways) on Bessie Smith: Janis Joplin even paid for the tombstone that finally marked Bessie's grave in 1970.