



# Bessie Smith

By Chris Albertson

SHE SHOWED ME THE AIR and taught me how to fill it," said Janis Joplin of Bessie Smith, whose potent voice and distinct style continue to inspire new generations of vocalists fifty-one years after her death.

"I know that people don't sing like they used to," Alberta Hunter said in a 1978 interview. "I mean, styles keep changing, but Bessie had something in her voice, something in her delivery that tugged at your soul and inspired you to sing."

We tend to think of Bessie Smith as a great blues singer, but we base our impression on records — she made 160 three-minute sides — which captured only one facet of her talent. In fact, Bessie was a versatile entertainer who regularly danced, acted and performed comedy routines with her touring company. She traveled in her personal railroad car, built to her specifications, which featured a galley and a bathroom with hot and cold running water and comfortably slept twenty-eight principal performers in its seven staterooms. A lower level housed up to thirty-five additional members of the Bessie Smith entourage.

"Everybody in the South knew that car," recalled Bessie's niece Ruby Smith, who traveled with her aunt for fourteen years. "The kids used to see us go by, and they waved, and I know they dreamed of some day leaving their town with a show like ours — or any show, for that matter."

When Bessie left Chattanooga, Tennessee, where she was born on April 15th, 1894, it was with a more modest show, the Moses Stokes Company. Her brother Clarence was the troupe's comedian, and the sixteen-year-old Bessie was hired as much for her dancing ability as for her singing. The Stokes troupe already boasted a formidable blues exponent, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey. Often referred to as the Mother of the Blues, Ma Rainey was a short, portly woman with an infectious gold-toothed smile and a style of singing that resembled that of the male blues minstrels who roamed throughout the South in those days.

It has been said that Ma Rainey "kidnapped" Bessie and taught her everything she knew, but that is likely some writer's fanciful version of the truth. "She may have taught her a few dance steps or showed her how to walk onstage," said the late actor Leigh Whipper in a 1971 interview, "but Bessie was born with that voice, and she had a style of her own when I first heard her in Atlanta."

Whipper first saw Bessie perform around 1913, at Atlanta's "81" Theatre. Having spent only a few months with the Stokes troupe, she was now making the famous Atlanta theater a home base from which she toured with such companies as the Silas Green Show and Pete Werley's Florida Blossoms. In 1918 she was one-half of a specialty act with singer Hazel Greene, and just as their billing was rising to the top of the marquee, Bessie decided to strike out on her own.

Details of Bessie's activities during the World War I period are sketchy. We know that she performed regularly and that she married Earl Love, a Mississippian about whom she would reveal no more than that he died in the war. By 1922 she was living in Philadelphia, where she met her second husband, a night watchman named Jack Gee. They were married in June of the following year, just as Columbia Records shipped Bessie's first and most successful coupling, "Gulf Coast Blues" and "Down Hearted Blues." It sold more than 800,000 copies during the first six months of release, firmly establishing her as a major artist in the newly discovered black record market.

After two decades of virtually ignoring the existence of blacks, both

as artists and consumers, the record industry discovered gold when *Crazy Blues*, a 1920 Okeh recording by Mamie Smith, became a hit. Soon talent scouts were combing the South for female blues singers.

Throughout the Twenties, Bessie continued to tour with her own show, zigzagging through the South "under canvas" in the spring and summer months and working the T.O.B.A. (Theater Owners' Booking Association) circuit for the rest of the year. Full houses were the norm when Bessie appeared, and she frequently had to do special shows for white audiences. "Only the most popular acts got to play for white people," Ruby Smith recalled. At the height of her career, Bessie made \$2000 a week, more than any other black performer of that period. Even when she played in the North, her audiences were largely transplanted Southerners who understood the message of the blues but found it hard to identify with the polished urban styles of Josephine Baker and Ethel Waters. Native New Yorkers, black and white, preferred music with more stomp and pep in it — they were bored silly by the slow pace of a mournful blues.

As the decade drew to a close, Bessie saw her work crumble around her. There was the Depression, of course, but that alone would have had a minimal effect on her life. What really changed it was the advent of talking pictures and the subsequent death of vaudeville. At the same time, Bessie also had to cope with personal problems, the most severe of which was a split with Jack Gee. There were also professional disasters, such as her appearance in *Pansy*, a Broadway musical that closed after the first performance. Critics agreed that Bessie was the production's only asset, but she was limited to one song in the second act.

In 1930, Columbia Records lowered Bessie's fee per side from \$200 to \$125, then dropped her altogether the following year. Times were bad, but Bessie was a survivor. She realized that the blues vogue had disappeared with the Twenties but that there was nothing wrong with her style of singing that a change in repertoire and accompaniment couldn't correct. Determined not to become a relic, Bessie shifted gears.

Billed as the Queen of All Torch Singers, she appeared at the Apollo Theater with a new look. The horsehair wigs, feathers and beads were replaced by a smart, simple satin evening gown and her own hair, swept back and accented by a pair of teardrop earrings. She sang the popular fare of the day, songs like "Tea for Two" and "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes." "She would have been right up there with the rest of us in the Swing Era," said Lionel Hampton, whose favorite uncle was Bessie's new boyfriend. "She always adapted the *now* sound, whatever that became, but we never got around to recording it."

In September 1937, just as she was about to enter the Swing Era spotlight, Bessie Smith was fatally injured in an automobile accident on a dark Mississippi highway. It was falsely reported that she was taken to a whites-only hospital and turned away, and this romanticized story was perpetuated for close to thirty-five years. The truth is that Bessie was taken straight to the G.T. Thomas Hospital, in Clarkesdale, where she died a few hours later.

Generations of performers have drawn inspiration from Bessie Smith's music as well as from her feisty spirit. Bessie was the Empress of the Blues, but she was also a remarkable woman who rose to the top of her profession, higher than any black American artist had gone before. As Mahalia Jackson put it, "She haunted you even after she stopped singing."

