PBS - JAZZ A Film By Ken Burns: Selected Artist Biography - Bessie Smith

Bessie Smith

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(1894-1937) Singer



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Bessie Smith began her professional career in 1912 by singing in the same show as Ma Rainey, and subsequently performed in various touring minstrel shows and cabarets. By the 1920s, she was a leading artist in black shows on the TOBA circuit and at the 81 Theatre in Atlanta. After further tours she was sought out by Clarence Williams to record in New York. Her first recording, *Down-Hearted Blues*, established her as the most successful black performing artist of her time. She recorded regularly until 1928 with important early jazz instrumentalists such as Williams, James P. Johnson, and various members of Fletcher Henderson's band, including Louis Armstrong, Charlie Green, Joe Smith, and Tommy Ladnier. During this period she also toured throughout the South and North, performing to large audiences. In 1929, she appeared in the film *St. Louis Blues*. By then, however, alcoholism had severely damaged her career, as did the Depression, which affected the recording and entertainment industries. A recording session, her last, was arranged in 1933 by John Hammond for the increasing European jazz audience; it featured among others Jack Teagarden and Benny Goodman. By 1936, Smith was again performing in shows and clubs, but she died, following an automobile accident, before her next recording session had been arranged.

Smith was unquestionably the greatest of the vaudeville blues singers and brought the emotional intensity, personal involvement, and expression of blues singing into the jazz repertory with unexcelled artistry. *Baby Doll* and *After You've Gone*, both made with Joe

Smith, and *Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out*, with Ed Allen on cornet, illustrate her capacity for sensitive interpretation of popular songs. Her broad phrasing, fine intonation, blue-note inflections, and wide, expressive range made hers the measure of jazz-blues singing in the 1920s. She made almost 200 recordings, of which her remarkable duets with Armstrong are among her best. Although she excelled in the performance of slow blues, she also recorded vigorous versions of jazz standards. Joe Smith was her preferred accompanist, but possibly her finest recording (and certainly the best known in her day) was *Back Water Blues*, with James P. Johnson. Her voice had coarsened by the time of her last session, but few jazz artists have been as consistently outstanding as she.



NPR's Louis Armstrong Centennial Radio Project: Bessie Smith
Harry "Sweets" Edison, jazz historian Gunther Schuller, and Armstrong himself recall the "Empress of the Blues."
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