

Abram Hill

Aug. 24, 1939

Bessie Smith

Bessie was the queen of the blues whose records sold into figures that compete with the circulation of the Saturday Evening Post. She was ~~X~~ very popular among the lovers of the blues. She had an immense following throughout the South. She played the vaudeville houses along the Atlantic seaboard and as far west as the Mississippi River. In proportion to the population of Harlem, Bessie's local following was small in comparison to her large following in cities such as Baltimore, Philadelphia, Atlanta and New Orleans.

When Bessie died a little over a year ago, she was reputed to have earned over a half million dollars. She had a long and successful career. Her contemporaries were Ethel Waters and Mamie Smith. Ethel's appeal was more for the sophisticated audience. Mamie's style was much on the order of the illustrious Bessie. Mamie lacked the originality and intimacy in her voice that made Bessie the master of the blues. Bessie stood alone as chief exponent of those homely love sick songs. Carl Van Vetchen once said of Bessie: " Bessie Smith is like a voodoo priestess. She renders her songs with throbbing savagery and wild ecstasy of African jungles."

A typical Bessie Smith appearance on the stage was something like this. A new placard, reading, "BESSIE SMITH" appeared in the frames in either side of the proscenium. As the curtain lifted, a jazz band against a background of plum hangings, held the full stage. The saxophone began to moan. The drummer tossed his sticks. One was transplanted, involuntarily to a Harlem cabaret. Presently, the band struck up a slower and still more moanful strain. The hangings parted and a great brown woman emerged. She was the size of Fay Templeton in her Weber and Field days, and she was garbed in a rose satin dress, decorated with sequins, which swept away from her ankles. Her face was beautiful, with the rich, ripe beauty of Southern darkness. She walked slowly to the footlights. Then to the accompaniment of the wailing, muted brasses, the monotonous African beat of the drum, the dromedary glide of the pianist's fingers over responsive keys, she began her strange song in a voice full of shoutin' and moaning and prayin' and sufferin', a wild rough Ethiopian voice, harsh and volcanic, released between rouged lips and the whitest teeth, the singer swaying slightly to the rhythm.

" Yo treated me wrong;  
I treated yo right;  
I wo'ked for yo full day an' night.  
Yo brag to women.  
I was yo fool.  
So I got dose sobbin' hahted Blues."

And now inspired partly by the lines, partly by the stumbling strain of the accompaniment, partly by the power and magnetic personality of the elemental conjure woman and the plangent African coice, quivering with pain and passion, which sounded as if it had been developed at the source of the Nile, the crowd burst into hysterical shrieks of sorrow and lamentation, Amens rent the air. Little nervous giggles, like the shivering of venetian glass, shocked the nerves.

The genius of Bessie was in the warm appeal of her moanful voice. She took her songs from the life of the lowly Negro, his tragic environment and the ugliness of his struggle. She punctuated this with artistry and delivered it over the footlights.

The decline of vaudeville and the advance of radio entertainment for a time made the Queen step down from her throne. The crooning vogue became the popular method of putting over a song. Bessie soon mastered this. When the phonograph records, amplified through the record player attached to radio, enjoyed an upward splurge, Bessie found herself in demand again. She rose to the top for the second time. She remained there until her sudden death. Death resulting from an automobile accident brought an end to a career which lasted for a quarter of a century.

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