



NAXOS
BLUES
LEGENDS

BESSIE SMITH

VOL. 3

Preachin' the Blues

**ORIGINAL
RECORDINGS
1925-1927**

Featuring
**FLETCHER
HENDERSON**

BESSIE SMITH *Vol. 3*

'Preachin' The Blues' Original Recordings 1925-1927

When Mamie Smith recorded "Crazy Blues" in 1920, it changed the music industry. The completely unexpected success of her recording, the first time that a black singer had recorded the blues, showed the labels that there was a major untapped market for record sales among African-Americans. In hopes of duplicating the sales of "Crazy Blues," record companies who had previously neglected the black market rushed to record every black female vocalist who could sing a blues, whether their background was in Southern theatres or Northern vaudeville. While many vocalists were only documented during 1921-23 on two or four titles before being dropped and forgotten, such major talents as Ma Rainey, Alberta Hunter, Ethel Waters, Ida Cox and Trixie Smith became stars. But the biggest discovery of all was Bessie Smith.

She was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee on 15 April 1894 to a very poor family. Bessie's father passed away while she was a child and her mother died when she was ten. Raised by an older sister, Bessie often raised money for the family by singing on street corners while her brother accompanied her on guitar. Things changed drastically in 1912 when she got a job with the Moses Stokes troupe as a dancer, a traveling show that featured Ma Rainey as its

singer. Smith learned about show business from Rainey and within a short time she was singing herself. After gaining a decade of experience performing in shows and various companies throughout the South, Bessie Smith was a major attraction, one whose renditions of blues were often considered hypnotic.

On 16 February 1923, Bessie Smith made her recording debut. Her version of Alberta Hunter's "Down Hearted Blues" was a big hit and resulted in her recording prolifically for the Columbia label throughout the 1920s. Although the blues craze began to fade during 1924-25, Smith's career gained in fame and prosperity. During the period covered by this set (1925-27), 'The Empress of the Blues' headed her own Harlem Frolics show, was making as much as \$2,000 a week (a huge sum in 1925) and was at the height of her popularity.

Thirty-one at the time that she recorded **I Ain't Got Nobody**, Bessie Smith shows on this performance how she infused pop tunes with the feeling of the blues. In her earliest recordings she was able to overcome the primitive recording quality. By 1925 records sounded more lifelike and, although altoist Bob Fuller's playing is not too inspiring, Smith's powerful singing easily overshadows that

obstacle. He's Gone Blues teams the singer (who really wails on the long notes) with her regular accompanist of the period, pianist Fred Longshaw. This is one of eight songs on this collection on which Smith wrote the lyrics.

Nobody's Blues But Mine has a return appearance by Fuller, whose alto playing seems to be trying to emulate Sidney Bechet but with little success. No matter, Smith sounds quite passionate on this blues ballad.

Clarence Williams, a very prolific organizer of record dates who was also a busy songwriter and publisher in the 1920s, was the pianist on Smith's first record dates. He accompanies the singer on a pair of his songs: **New Gulf Coast Blues** and **Florida Bound**. Although he was not a virtuoso, Williams always played very well with Smith, letting her take the lead while he filled in the spaces with colorful breaks.

Cornetist Joe Smith and trombonist Charlie Green, both members of the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra, were two of Smith's favorite accompanists. They inspired her without competing with her singing, uplifting each performance. At **The Christmas Ball**, Smith's only Christmas-related recording, is one of her happier performances. **I've Been Mistreated And I Don't Like It** is more optimistic than the title suggests, with Bessie planning on dumping her no-account man as soon as possible. Although both **Red Mountain Blues** and **Golden Rule Blues** are obscure, Smith's intense singing makes them memorable, assisted by Fletcher

Henderson (whose piano playing is heard here at its best) and Don Redman, who takes a tune apiece on clarinet and alto.

Squeeze Me was Fats Waller's first composition, written with Clarence Williams in 1918. Williams is on piano behind Bessie, who gives the song a treatment that would not be equaled until Mildred Bailey adopted it as one of her trademark songs in the 1930s.

The next four tunes team Bessie with Joe Smith and Fletcher Henderson. Smith's mellow tone was perfectly supportive of the singer in a way similar to Lester Young behind Billie Holiday in the late 1930s. While Louis Armstrong's earlier dates with Bessie featured two giants battling it out, Joe Smith sounds quite happy being in the supporting cast where his beautiful sound blends in very well with her voice. His twelve breaks on **Hard Driving Papa**, each of which start with the same high note, are spectacular. **Money Blues**, **Baby Doll**, **Hard Driving Papa** and **Lost Your Head Blues** were not destined to become standards but by this point in time it almost did not matter what song Bessie Smith interpreted; she turned every piece into at least a near-classic. As it is, these four tunes are all excellent and well worth reviving. Although the cornetist is missed on **Hard Time Blues**, which just has Bessie backed by Henderson, her philosophical lyrics and general feistiness make this a haunting song. Joe Smith and clarinetist Buster Bailey help out on **Young Woman's Blues** which has lyrics that are a little autobiographical in a general way.

The matchup of Bessie Smith with James P. Johnson resulted in musical magic although it was unexpected. A sophisticated musician who largely founded stride piano and set the standard for pianists of the 1920s, Johnson was not really thought of as a blues pianist. However he was a very sympathetic and inspired accompanist who recorded fourteen selections (a dozen as the only support) with the Empress; four in 1927, eight in 1929 and two with a vocal group the following year. **Back-Water Blues** (which has memorable lyrics

about a flood) is a classic and **Preachin' The Blues** is nearly on the same level.

Bessie Smith had both great accomplishments and struggles to experience during the remaining decade of her life before she died on 26 September 1937. As the premiere singer of the 1920s and as a blues vocalist, the Empress Of The Blues still reigns supreme.

Scott Yanow

– author of 7 jazz books including *Classic Jazz* (which covers the 1920s), *Swing, Bebop and Trumpet Kings*

Also available in the Naxos Legends series ...



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* Not available in the USA

1. **I Ain't Got Nobody** 3:08
(Roger Graham–Spencer Williams)
Bessie Smith & Her Band
Columbia 14095-D, mx W 140853-3
Recorded 19 August 1925
2. **He's Gone Blues** 3:13
(Bessie Smith)
Columbia 14083-D, mx W 140717-3
Recorded 25 June 1925
3. **Nobody's Blues But Mine** 3:00
(Clarence Williams)
Bessie Smith & Her Band
Columbia 14098-D, mx W 140857-3
Recorded August 1925
4. **New Gulf Coast Blues** 3:29
(Clarence Williams)
Columbia 14109-D, mx W 141276-D
Recorded 17 November 1925
5. **Florida Bound** 3:21
(Clarence Williams)
Columbia 14109-D, mx W 141277-3
Recorded 17 November 1925
6. **At The Christmas Ball** 3:31
(Fred Longshaw)
Columbia 35842, mx W 141283-1
Recorded 18 November 1925
7. **I've Been Mistreated And I Don't Like It** 3:01
(Fred Longshaw)
Columbia 14115-D, mx W 141285-3
Recorded 20 November 1925
8. **Red Mountain Blues** 3:18
(Henry Troy)
Columbia 14115-D, mx W 141293-2
Recorded 20 November 1925
9. **Golden Rule Blues** 3:08
(Bessie Smith)
Columbia 14123-D, mx W 141294-2
Recorded 20 November 1925
10. **Squeeze Me** 2:55
(Clarence Williams–Thomas Waller)
Columbia 14133-D, mx W 141768-3
Recorded 5 March 1926
11. **Money Blues** 3:12
(D. Kapp–G. Coleman–H. Eller)
Columbia 14137-D, mx W 142146-3
Recorded 4 May 1926
12. **Baby Doll** 3:01
(Bessie Smith)
Columbia 14147-D, mx W 142147-2
Recorded 4 May 1926
13. **Hard Driving Papa** 2:58
(George Brooks)
Columbia 14137-D, mx W 142148-3
Recorded 4 May 1926
14. **Lost Your Head Blues** 2:57
(Bessie Smith)
Columbia 14158-D, mx W 142149-1
Recorded 4 May 1926
15. **Hard Time Blues** 3:12
(Bessie Smith)
Columbia 14179-D, mx W 142874-2
Recorded 25 October 1926

16. **Young Woman's Blues** 3:07
(Bessie Smith)
Bessie Smith & Her Blue Boys
Columbia 14179-D, mx W 142878-3
Recorded 26 October 1926
17. **Back-Water Blues** 3:20
(Bessie Smith)
Columbia 14195-D, mx W 143491-1
Recorded 17 February 1927

18. **Preachin' The Blues** 2:56
(Bessie Smith)
Columbia 14195-D, mx W 143490-1
Recorded 17 February 1927

All selections recorded in New York
Transfers & Production: David Lennick
Digital Noise Reduction: K&A Productions Ltd
Original recordings from the collections of Roger
Misiewicz and John Wilby

Personnel

Tracks 1 & 3: Bob Fuller, alto sax; Isadore
Myers, piano; Elmer Snowden, banjo

Track 2: Fred Longshaw, piano

Tracks 4 & 5: Clarence Williams, piano

Tracks 6 & 7: Joe Smith, cornet; Charlie Green,
trombone; Fletcher Henderson, piano

Tracks 8 & 9: Don Redman, clarinet; Fletcher
Henderson, piano

Tracks 10 & 15: Fletcher Henderson, piano

Tracks 11-14: Joe Smith, cornet; Fletcher
Henderson, piano

Track 16: Joe Smith, cornet; Buster Bailey,
clarinet; Fletcher Henderson, piano

Track 17 & 18: James P. Johnson, piano
Bessie Smith, vocal on all tracks

Original monochrome photo of Bessie Smith from Michael Ochs Archives / Redferns

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ADD

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NOTES AND FULL RECORDING DETAILS INCLUDED

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Total
Time
56:47

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BESSIE SMITH Preachin' The Blues

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