



**NAXOS**  
**BLUES**  
LEGENDS

# BESSIE SMITH

**VOL. 4**

## *Empty Bed Blues*

**ORIGINAL  
RECORDINGS  
1927-1928**

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## 'Empty Bed Blues' Original Recordings 1927-1928

Bessie Smith, in her earliest recordings from 1923-24, often had to overcome both the inferior technical quality of the recording equipment of the time and some indifferent accompaniment. She was able to surmount those potential obstacles through the power of her voice and even her lesser recordings sound relevant and lively to today's listeners. By 1927 when she was at the peak of her powers, both the recording quality and the playing of her sidemen had vastly improved and the Empress Of The Blues was recording classic after classic, showing that no singer during the era was on her level.

Bessie, who turned 33 in 1927, had already been working in show business for fifteen years. She was born on 15 April 1894 in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Bessie grew up in poverty and was an orphan by the time she was ten. She often raised money for her family by singing on street corners, accompanied by her brother on guitar. In 1912 Bessie gained work as a dancer with the Moses Stokes troupe, the traveling show that featured the first known blues singer, Ma Rainey. Although her style owed little to that of the more primitive Rainey, she learned about selling a song to an audience from the older vocalist. Within a couple of years Bessie was on her way to becoming a major attraction in the South as a singer whose passionate versions of blues could virtually hypnotize an audience. By 1919 she was

headlining her own shows and had become famous in the world of black vaudeville and tent shows.

The surprise success of Mamie Smith's 1920 recording of "Crazy Blues" opened the door for classic blues singers, many of whom were discovered and rushed into studios by record labels eager to cash in on the new craze. Bessie Smith had her turn on 16 February 1923 when she recorded Alberta Hunter's "Down Hearted Blues" (featured on Naxos Jazz Legends 8.120660, Bessie Smith Volume 1). That recording was such a hit that Bessie would be making records regularly for Columbia for the next decade. The blues craze faded during 1924-25 but that had no effect on Smith's career for her recordings and live shows had made her a major celebrity, particularly for a black woman in the 1920s. Billed as "The Empress Of The Blues," she headed her Harlem Frolics show and generally enjoyed her partying life.

Volume 4 in Naxos' series of the very best Bessie Smith recordings starts off with all four titles that she recorded on 2 March 1927 during one of her finest record dates. Particularly unusual is that none of the songs are blues though **Muddy Water** comes close. Backed by five (and, on one song, six) of the top players from the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra including her favoured cornetist/trumpeter Joe Smith,

Bessie sounds quite exuberant on these titles. **Alexander's Ragtime Band** was already a vintage song by 1927 but this is its definitive version. **Muddy Water** is given a low-down treatment while **After You've Gone**, a relatively new tune, is turned into a stirring blues by the Empress despite not even being distantly related in its chords. **There'll Be A Hot Time In The Old Town Tonight** is quite celebratory and joyous, as if Bessie were celebrating both her career and her lifestyle. On these titles, she showed that she was flexible enough to be a bluish singer of standards rather than just a blues singer.

The subject matter is much more sombre at the 3 March session. Bessie Smith tells a judge in eloquent fashion that she deserves the ultimate punishment on **Send Me To The 'Lectric Chair** while on **Them's Graveyard Words** (which could be the prelude to "'Lectric Chair") she relates how she is very tempted to kill her lover. In both cases, one ends up sympathizing with her.

Bessie Smith and pianist James P. Johnson had previously teamed up on a slightly earlier session that resulted in the classic "Backwater Blues." A reunion date yielded **Sweet Mistreater** and **Lock And Key**. The fact that Johnson, the innovative stride pianist who largely founded the style, was not strictly a blues pianist ironically contributed to him being Bessie's perfect musical match. Her bluish long tones contrast well with his striding and they clearly inspired each other every time they recorded.

The Empress rarely ever used a tuba player on her records; it only happened on three

sessions. June Cole's playing on **Foolish Man Blues** is quite fluent and gives the song a strong third voice along with cornetist Tommy Ladnier and the singer. Bessie is heard in prime form on **Thinking Blues** and **I Used To Be Your Sweet Mama** while joined by a trio that includes her favorite trombonist, the expressive Charlie Green. These colourful blues style-wise could have been recorded by Bessie four years earlier but they still sound fresh and timeless, particularly **I Used To Be Your Sweet Mama** which has her fighting successfully for her independence.

While clarinetists Ernest Elliott and Bob Fuller were erratic players, Bessie is so powerful on **I'd Rather Be Dead And Buried In My Grave** that one barely notices their presence. Fortunately Charlie Green is back for the next three numbers; the obscure **Standin' In The Rain Blues, It Won't Be You** (on which she again declares her independence) and the classic **Empty Bed Blues**. The latter piece, Bessie's only two-sided 78, is full of double-entendres from the singer and witty asides and comments from Green, who sets the standard for blues trombone playing.

In 1928 vaudeville and the blues circuit were both in decline but Bessie Smith's career continued to flourish. At the height of her fame and performing in her own Mississippi Days show, Smith was still able to generate large crowds. **Please Help Me Get Him Off My Mind**, with the forgotten but fine trombonist Joe Williams in Green's spot, shows that Bessie still displayed a lot of intensity in her delivery. While

the fearsome twosome of Fuller and Elliott do not help the final three numbers on this program, Bessie is typically powerful on **Washwoman's Blues**, the atmospheric **Devil's Gonna Get You** and a swinging **Yes Indeed He Do** which concludes the set on a happy note.

Bessie Smith's successes would continue until the Depression and a drastic change in the public's musical tastes put her through some lean years. The **Alexander's Ragtime Band** session gives hints as to her strategy of the mid-1930s when she reinvented herself as a ballad

## Personnel

Bessie Smith, vocal on all tracks

*Track 1:* **Joe Smith**, cornet; **Jimmy Harrison**, trombone; **Coleman Hawkins**, clarinet; **Fletcher Henderson**, piano; **Charlie Dixon**, banjo

*Track 2:* **Joe Smith**, cornet; **Jimmy Harrison**, trombone; **Coleman Hawkins**, **Buster Bailey**, clarinets; **Fletcher Henderson**, piano; **Charlie Dixon**, banjo

*Tracks 3, 4:* **Joe Smith**, cornet; **Jimmy Harrison**, trombone; **Buster Bailey**, clarinet; **Fletcher Henderson**, piano; **Charlie Dixon**, banjo

*Tracks 5, 6:* **Joe Smith**, cornet; **Charlie Green**, trombone; **Fletcher Henderson**, piano

*Tracks 7, 8:* **James P. Johnson**, piano

and swing singer who infused her music with blues rather than sticking exclusively to performing blues. The stage was set for a strong comeback when she was tragically killed in a car accident on 26 September 1937.

More than 65 years after her death, there has never been a second Empress Of The Blues.

*Scott Yanow*

— author of seven jazz books including *Swing, Bebop, Trumpet Kings* and *Jazz On Record 1917-76*

*Track 9:* **Tommy Ladnier**, cornet; **Fletcher Henderson**, piano; **June Cole**, tuba

*Tracks 10, 11, 13, 14:* **Demas Dean**, cornet; **Charlie Green**, trombone; **Fred Longshaw**, piano

*Track 12:* **Ernest Elliott**, **Bob Fuller**, clarinets; **Porter Grainger**, piano

*Track 15:* **Charlie Green**, trombone; **Porter Grainger**, piano

*Track 16:* **Joe Williams**, trombone; **Porter Grainger**, piano

*Tracks 17, 18, 19:* **Bob Fuller**, clarinet, alto sax; **Ernest Elliott**, clarinet, alto & tenor sax; **Porter Grainger**, piano

Original monochrome photo of Bessie Smith from Max Jones Files / Redferns

1. **Alexander's Ragtime Band** 3:00  
(Irving Berlin)  
Bessie Smith & Her Band  
Columbia 14219-D, mx W 143568-1  
Recorded 2 March 1927
2. **Muddy Water** 3:09  
(Peter de Rose–Harry Richman–Jo Trent)  
Bessie Smith & Her Band  
Columbia 14197-D, mx W 143569-2  
Recorded 2 March 1927
3. **After You've Gone** 2:57  
(Henry Creamer–Turner Layton)  
Bessie Smith & Her Band  
Columbia 14197-D, mx W 143567-2  
Recorded 2 March 1927
4. **There'll Be A Hot Time In The Old Town Tonight** 3:20  
(Joe Hayden–Theodore A. Metz)  
Bessie Smith & Her Band  
Columbia 14219-D, mx W 143570-1  
Recorded 2 March 1927
5. **Send Me To The 'Lectric Chair** 3:25  
(Shelton Brooks)  
Bessie Smith & Her Blue Boys  
Columbia 14209-D, mx W 143576-2  
Recorded 3 March 1927
6. **Them's Graveyard Words** 2:59  
(Shelton Brooks)  
Bessie Smith & Her Blue Boys  
Columbia 14209-D, mx W 143583-2  
Recorded 3 March 1927
7. **Sweet Mistreater** 3:02  
(Henry Creamer–James P. Johnson)  
Columbia 14260-D, mx W 143735-3  
Recorded 1 April 1927
8. **Lock And Key** 3:00  
(Henry Creamer–James P. Johnson)  
Columbia 14232-D, mx W 143736-3  
Recorded 1 April 1927
9. **Foolish Man Blues** 2:56  
(Bessie Smith)  
Columbia 14273-D, mx W 144919-3  
Recorded 27 October 1927
10. **Thinking Blues** 3:12  
(Bessie Smith)  
Columbia 14292-D, mx W 145626-2  
Recorded 9 February 1928
11. **I Used To Be Your Sweet Mama** 2:54  
(L. Miller–Fred Longshaw)  
Columbia 14292-D, mx W 145628-1  
Recorded 9 February 1928
12. **I'd Rather Be Dead And Buried In My Grave** 3:00  
(P. Fuller)  
Columbia 14304-D, mx W 145650-2  
Recorded 16 February 1928
13. **Standin' In The Rain Blues** 2:55  
(Bessie Smith)  
Columbia 14338-D, mx W 145670-1  
Recorded 21 February 1928
14. **It Won't Be You** 2:50  
(Bessie Smith)  
Columbia 14338-D, mx W 145671-1  
Recorded 21 February 1928

15. **Empty Bed Blues** 6:25  
(J. C. Johnson)  
Columbia 14312-D, mx W 145785-3 and 145786-1  
Recorded 10 March 1928
16. **Please Help Me Get Him Off My Mind** 3:01  
(Bessie Smith)  
Columbia 14375-D, mx W 146896-2  
Recorded 25 August 1928
17. **Washwoman's Blues** 3:14  
(Spencer Williams)  
Columbia 14375-D, mx W 146893-2  
Recorded 24 August 1928

18. **Devil's Gonna Get You** 3:14  
(Porter Grainger)  
Columbia 14354-D, mx W 146888-2  
Recorded 24 August 1928
19. **Yes Indeed He Do** 3:20  
(Porter Grainger)  
Columbia 14354-D, mx W 146887-2  
Recorded 24 August 1928

All selections recorded in New York

Transfers & Production: David Lennick  
Digital Noise Reduction: K&A Productions Ltd  
Original recordings from the collections of David Lennick, John Wilby, Roger Misiewicz and John Rutherford

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ADD

NOTES AND FULL RECORDING DETAILS INCLUDED

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