

Smith, Bessie (15 Apr. 1894-26 Sept. 1937), blues singer, was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, the daughter of William Smith, a part-time Baptist preacher, and Laura (maiden name unknown). She was one of seven children. The parents died when Smith was eight. An older sister, Viola, raised the children who were still at home in what Smith later referred to as a "little ramshackle cabin." (According to the journalist George Hoefler, however, Smith was brought up by a grandmother of another future jazzwoman, [Lovie Austin](#).) At about age nine she began singing on Chattanooga's Ninth Street for pennies, accompanied by her brother Andrew on guitar. When another brother, Clarence, joined Moses Stokes' Traveling Show (based in Chattanooga's Ivory Theater), he arranged an audition for her. While still in her teens, she joined the troupe, working primarily as a dancer. In 1912 blues singer [Ma Rainey](#), who had come through Chattanooga while on tour with Fat Chappell's Rabbit Foot Minstrels, heard Smith sing and invited her to join the show. Later that same year, she also toured briefly as a chorus line member in Irvin C. Miller's tent show, *Glorying the Brownskin Girl*.

In 1913 Smith played at the "81" Theater in Atlanta and in the following year teamed with Buzzin' Burton to work as a singer/dancer in *Park's Big Revue* at the Dixie Theater, also in Atlanta. A few years later she began performing with several minstrel and vaudeville shows, including the Pete Werley Florida Cotton Blossoms Minstrel Show and the Silas Green Minstrel Show. She also teamed with Hazel Green to perform in 1918 at the Douglas Gilmore Theater in Baltimore, Maryland, and starred in her own revue, *Liberty Belles* (1918-1919), as a singer, dancer, and male impersonator. Around 1920 Smith married Earl Love, who died in 1922. It is not known if the couple had children. During the early 1920s she performed throughout the South and the East Coast, including club dates in and around Atlantic City, where she performed with Charles Johnson's Band and Charley Taylor's Band. Having gradually acquired a substantial following, in 1921 she cut a recording test for Black Swan Records (the only record company owned at the time by African Americans) and for Emerson, where she recorded the piece "Sister Kate" with clarinetist [Sidney Bechet](#). Neither company signed her on. In 1922 Smith moved to Philadelphia, where she worked at Horan's Madhouse Club (1920-1923), the Standard Theater with her own band (beginning 1921), and the Dunbar Theater with Bechet in the musical comedy *How Come* (1923). [Frank Walker](#) of Columbia Records, having heard Smith sing in Selma, Alabama, sent pianist [Clarence Williams](#) to bring her to New York City for a recording session. Columbia signed her on in 1923.

Also in 1923 she married Jack Gee, a night watchman she had met while performing at Horan's Madhouse Club in Philadelphia. (She also officially adopted a co-worker's son, whom they named Jack Gee, Jr., in 1926; however, with her divorce in 1929 from Jack, Sr., she lost custody of the young boy.) Shortly after the release of her first recording, *Down-Hearted Blues* (1923), she returned to Atlanta's "81" Theater. Her first night there was so successful that her performance on the following evening was broadcast live on radio. Smith brought an emotional intensity to the stage. She incorporated broad phrasing, had a wide singing range, and was considered to have excellent intonation and creative grasp of the blue note inflections. She quickly gained respect among musicians and audiences alike and her album sold over two million copies during its first year. Her income, reported at \$2,000 per week, established Smith as the most successful African-American performing artist of the time, and she became known as the "Empress of the Blues," as she was billed on her tours.

During the next ten years, Smith recorded a total of 180 songs, recording with such music greats as [James P. Johnson](#), [Coleman Hawkins](#), and various members of [Fletcher Henderson's](#) Band, including [Louis Armstrong](#), Charlie Green, [Joe Smith](#), and Tommy Ladnier. In 1928, however, her popularity began to diminish. Possible explanations for this include the fading of the blues era; audiences' desire for something "new"; the popularity of radio and film (in which Smith was only remotely involved); and Smith's drinking habits. Although in 1929 she appeared in the film *St. Louis Blues* and in the Broadway show *Pansy*, her performance opportunities were becoming more limited, probably in part because of the Depression. She managed to get secondary roles as a singer on vaudeville tours (with some she was expected to sell cigarettes between acts), and she did not record again until [John Hammond](#) brought her back into the studio in 1933. The Hammond session was designed to appease the increasing European jazz audiences and featured white musicians [Jack Teagarden](#) and [Benny Goodman](#). Smith, acutely aware of the changing times, specifically asked that "pop" tunes such as "Do Your Duty" and "Take Me for a Buggy Ride" be included on the album. The album, however, failed to succeed as Hammond had hoped. Smith then moved from Philadelphia to New York City.

In 1934 Smith toured theaters in the South with the *Hot From Harlem* revue, and performed with [Ida Cox](#) in *Fan Waves* revue at the Apollo Theater and with Don Redman's Orchestra at the Harlem Opera House, both in New York City. Still performing in New York, in 1935 she worked the *Blackbirds* revue at the Cotton Club and in 1936 performed in both the *Stars Over Broadway* revue at Connie's Inn and the *League of Rhythm* revue at the Apollo. In 1937 she began a tour with the *Broadway Rastas* revue, working once again in theaters in the South.

On 26 September 1937, with Richard Morgan at the wheel, her car collided with a truck, parked without lights on the roadside at Coahoma, Mississippi, just south of Memphis. Because of her skin color, she was refused admission in nearby hospitals and therefore had to be taken to an African-American hospital in Clarksdale, Mississippi--over 200 miles from the accident site. Never regaining consciousness, she died eight and a half hours after the time of the accident due to internal injuries and loss of blood. The controversy surrounding her lack of medical treatment because of her race mythicized her death and interested journalists to the point that she earned more column inches in the white press in death than she ever had during her life.

Beginning about a decade after Smith's death, memorials began appearing in various forms, commemorating her work as a blues singer. These include a Bessie Smith Memorial Concert that was held in New York City's Town Hall in 1948; the Edward Albee show *Death of Bessie Smith* that was produced in 1959, opening in West Berlin, Germany, in 1960, and in New York City in 1961; a short film, *Bessie Smith*, released in 1968; and a musical revue, *Me and Bessie*, starring Linda Hopkins, that played the Ambassador Theater in New York City from 1975 to 1976, followed by tours elsewhere. In 1967 Smith was posthumously given the *Down Beat* magazine International Jazz Critics Hall of Fame Award. In 1979 the Columbia record series "The World's Greatest Blues Singer: Bessie Smith" won the Grand Prix du Disque at the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland.

Bessie Smith was buried at the Mount Lawn Cemetery, Sharon Hill, Pennsylvania, in an unmarked grave. In 1970, two women, singer [Janis Joplin](#) and Juanita Green (who had cleaned the Smith home as a child and later became president of the North Philadelphia chapter of the NAACP), shared the costs of the headstone. Erected thirty-three years after her death, it reads, "The greatest blues singer in the world will never stop singing."

Bibliography

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