



BIOGRAPHY OF BESSIE SMITH

- - A Review Reprint

(In my quest for background materials for a play I plan to write on the life of Bessie Smith, I ran across this article which as proven to be very interesting and informative. It is reprinted with the permission of the author and the Winston-Salem Journal and Sentinel. We thank them both.)

Henry Pankey



Bessie Smith

"BESSIE." By Chris Albertson. Stein and Day. 253 pages. \$7.95.

When one considers the enormous legacy she left, the unmistakable stamp she put on three generations of jazz and pop singers from the performers of her day to Billie Holiday and Janis Joplin and the high drama of her life and death, it is surprising, even a bit shocking, that a serious biography of blues single Bessie Smith has not appeared before.

Possible writers have been scared off by her influence or some of the sordid details of her life. Possible many have felt the myths surrounding the Empress of the Blues too popular and too attractive to dispel.

Thirty-five years have passed since her death, and 45 since her hey-day. Many important documents have been lost; most of the people who knew her firsthand have died or forgotten the truth. Writing accurately about her from the standpoint of the '70's, therefore presents terrific hazards.

Chris Albertson, however, appears to have sidestepped the pitfalls. In telling Bessie's story and attempting to recreate what she was as a woman as well as a star, he seems to have taken nothing as truth without corroborating evidence.

Albertson opens with details of Bessie's grand exit, her funeral in Philadelphia in 1937, then doubles back to her birth in poverty in Chattanooga Tenn., probably on April 15, 1894. Like virtually everything else in her first 25 years, the date cannot be verified. Albertson presents the few facts that are known of Bessie's childhood, among them the early death of her parents and the future singer's decision in 1912 to leave four brothers and sisters to join another brother in a traveling show featuring the blues singer now ranked second only to Bessie, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey.

Legend has it "Ma" literally kidnapped young Bessie and taught her to sing blues. Albertson's sources deny this but suggest "Ma" Rainey's success may have inspired Bessie to specialize in blues music. Between 1915 and 1922, though, Bessie developed a style of her own and her own set of fans in the South and cities as far north as Atlantic City, N.J. She also developed a taste for cheap liquor that remained unquenched most of her life.

In 1920, the white music industry allowed Mamie Smith, a singer unrelated to Bessie, to become the first black to record as a soloist. Mamie's "Crazy Blues" opened the door to blacks and started a blues craze. Bessie was signed to record, at \$125 a side, by Columbia's "race" division and in February 1923 first stepped up to the acoustical horn then used to collect enough sound to register on wax. The session produced two usable takes, her classic "Gulf Coast Blues" and "Down Hearted Blues," which, to Columbia's astonishment, sold 780,000 copies in the next six months.

Such sales are very good even now, but for a record by a black to do that well in 1923 was phenomenal. Recordings by blacks were not sold in most stores patronized by whites or even heard by whites, and only a small percentage of blacks were then wealthy enough to afford costly record players or even records, which went for the princely sum of 75 cents each.

Soon commanding \$1,000 to \$2,000 a week, Bessie shared and sometimes squandered her new wealth on friends, relatives and a new husband, Jack Gee, blazing a trail through big city black theaters and through the South on the tent show circuit. As her career peaked and leveled off in 1925, her marriage began to crack as Jack found her dependence on alcohol and extramarital sex — both with men and women — intolerable. The couple avoided each other, and when thrown together, often fought physically as well as verbally, Bessie hurling all of her 200 pounds at Jack but generally coming off the loser.

When aroused, there was no one Bessie would not take on, including the Ku Klux Klan, which tried to interrupt her show in Concord in 1927. Told by a frightened musician that sheeted figures were pulling up the stakes of her tent, she flew into a rage, stomped out and accosted the klansmen. "What the *** you think you're doing?" she bellowed. "I'll get the whole damn tent out here if I have to. You just pick up them sheets and run." The startled klansmen did.

Oddly, the injustices of black-white relations on a larger scale did not draw her ire. Mistrustful of whites, she preferred the company of blacks and accepted the nearly total segregation of the times. Though affluent white liberals of the '20s courted her, she rarely socialized with them, and when she did, the results were usually mortifying to her white hosts. Unlike Ethel Waters, who was for a time a blues rival, and other black performers, she made no effort to embrace white audiences either, Albertson notes.

Through the late '20s, her records and shows remained popular but though she found some solace in an adopted son, her personal life floundered. Bessie and Gee separated in bitterness when she learned he had invested \$3,000 of her money in a rival show starring his new mistress. Shortly, the stock market crash left the record business in panic and Bessie's brand of the blues faded in popularity. As her wealth waned, friends dropped her and in November, 1931, Columbia dropped her too. Though she recorded four sides, at \$37.50 each, two years later, her recording career was over. To the public, Bessie Smith was a has-been.

Albertson gives a quick but bleak sketch of Bessie's most depressed days; little is available about them. While Ethel Waters was drawing \$1,250 for a single network radio broadcast and other blacks were getting movie offers the Empress of the Blues was usually out of work. Only after she made a shift to swing music did her career take a turn for the better.

Several appearances at black New York City theaters led to a lucky break, and Bessie was called in to replace an ailing young Billie Holiday at fashionable Connie's Inn in downtown Manhattan. Her performances in swing style galvanized patrons, and the engagement led to more work exposing Bessie to new audiences. The record industry began making new overtures; a movie was mentioned. Bessie was clearly on her feet again.

With renewed confidence, she accepted a featured spot in a show touring the South in late summer 1937. The show opened to good business in Memphis and was due in Darling, Miss., Sept. 26. Feeling restless after her final performance in Memphis, Bessie urged her lover, Richard Morgan, to drive them part of the way ahead of the company. Seventy-five miles out of Memphis, their car struck a truck pulling onto a narrow rural highway. Morgan escaped with few injuries, Bessie, on the side of the car that struck the truck, was seriously, perhaps mortally injured.

For 35 years, stories of racism of neglect by white doctors and hospital officials, have been connected with Bessie's death, most of them tied to an article by John Hammond, the producer of Bessie's last recordings, published in "down beat," a month after the accident. Hammond later admitted the piece was based entirely on

hearsay, but Hammond's title — "Did Bessie Smith Bleed To Death While Waiting For Medical Aid?" — is still remembered by many as a question to be answered "yes."

Albertson, though leaving personal conclusions to readers, debunks the myth by presenting testimony from Dr. Frank Smith, a white physician who happened onto the scene of the accident, and supporting details drawn from hospital records and a black ambulance driver who drove Bessie to the black hospital at Clarksburg where she died. He tells the other side by reprinting a 1938 clipping from a black newspaper. The piece, clearly inaccurate in some verifiable particulars, is based on Morgan's account as retold by Jack Gee Jr. to black reporters.

In a concise epilogue, Albertson traces the growth of Bessie's legend and, with justifiable cynicism, the ways others have made fortunes from Bessie's recordings without passing on a cent to her heirs. For all her recordings, Bessie was \$28,575 — less than most promising new talents get as an advance today. Record company officials hold there were no royalty arrangements in her day and apparently feel no moral or financial obligations to Bessie's surviving relatives. Ironically, Albertson, who says he received only a small fee for producing on a free-lance basis the current reissue of Bessie's work, is an accomplice in the crime.

If, however, Albertson owes Bessie anything, his book surely repays the debt. To read his meticulously researched and written biography is to travel the roads she traveled, take the jolts and bumps she took, indulge in her often illicit pleasures and understand the blues behind her blues. Another writer might have told her story more colorfully; but Albertson's version is colorful enough and besides is graced with the blessing that comes when a writer knows nothing better embellishes the reputation of a great artist than the truth.

- J I M S H E R T Z E R