

Activity Idea

Bessie Smith: Blues Legend

Recommended for Adults

"To my way of thinking Bessie Smith was the greatest artist American Jazz ever produced; in fact, I'm not sure her art did not reach beyond the limits of the term jazz. She was one of those rare beings—a completely integrated artist capable of projecting her whole personality into music."

- John Hammond, American record producer & music critic

Elizabeth "Bessie" Smith (April 15, 1894 – September 26, 1937) was the youngest child of seven born in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1894. Living in poverty, Smith began singing as a street performer on Ninth Street, Chattanooga's center of music and dance, with her guitar-playing brother Andrew. The first published reference of a performance by Smith—when she was only 14 years old—was in the May 8, 1909, issue of the Indianapolis newspaper *The Freedman*. According to the review of her performance at Atlanta's 81 Theater, Smith captivated her audience with her contralto voice.

Contralto is the lowest vocal range for female vocalists. Examples: Cher, Lauryn Hill & Karen Carpenter

Smith refined her vocal style on the Black vaudeville stage in the 1910s and 1920s. A mentee of "The Queen of the Blues" Ma Rainey (Library catalog link: <https://tinyurl.com/bdhv9wc>), she learned how to command an audience and navigate the music business. By the time she was 24 years old, Smith had her own solo acts and was performing throughout the American South and East Coast. In 1923, Smith signed with the record label Columbia Records, recording her 1st song "Down-hearted Blues," written by blues singer Alberta Hunter and pianist Lovie Austin. The song was a major hit and launched Smith into the fame. Smith recorded with blues & jazz musicians, including Louis Armstrong (Library catalog link: <https://tinyurl.com/ypatzew>) and Sidney Bechet (Library catalog link: <https://tinyurl.com/mwdnhnxw>). Her incredible talent and high-selling records led to her being the highest-paid African American artist working in music and the first African American superstar on of the time.



Posed full-length portrait of Bessie Smith

"I don't want no drummer. I set the tempo." - Bessie Smith

Throughout her career, Smith was unapologetically herself. She drank and was open about her romantic relationships with both men and women. Smith was married to Jack Gee, but he was neither able to accept Smith's show business life nor her bisexuality, and they ended up divorcing in 1929. Smith



incorporated the hardships of being Black working class in her lyrics by singing about poverty, racism, and sexism on top of singing about love and female sexuality. While certain critics labeled her as “rough,” Smith’s ability to channel her personality and life experience into her vocal performances is what made her stand out.

The Great Depression in 1928 cut Smith’s recording career short, and her last recording was in 1933. Still, Smith performed across the country. In 1937, enroute to Chattanooga, Smith suffered fatal injuries in a car accident in Mississippi. Smith’s funeral was held in Philadelphia, where she had been living since 1923, and was attended by more than 5,000 people. Bessie Smith left a legacy of authenticity, musicality and works that still influence musicians today.

“It’s a long old road, but I know I’m gonna find the end.” - Bessie Smith

Sources:

Books and other library resources about Bessie Smith: <https://tinyurl.com/bddu5dcw>

Bessie Smith (ca. 1895–1937), LGBTQ+ Objects and Media from the National Museum of African American History and Culture: <https://tinyurl.com/ycymbh7a>

Blues Legacies and Black Feminism by Angela Y. Davis: <https://tinyurl.com/5n8ph4ma>

How Bessie Smith Influenced a Century of Popular Music from NPR: <https://tinyurl.com/2p9bvz6m>

Spark an Idea!

Music is a global phenomenon and Jazz is a genre of music has a singular origin in the United States, predominantly brought forth by African Americans and their 500+ years of experiences, both good and bad throughout American history. To explore Jazz is to explore the American experience.

You are hereby challenged to create your own bit of the American experience by creating you own Jazz or Bessie Smith playlist using the free music streaming app Freegal with, accessible using your LA County Library card and PIN. With Freegal, you can enjoy ad-free, unlimited streaming of over 11 million songs – including the vast Sony Music Entertainment catalog. In addition, download 5 songs per week for you to keep. Find Freegal here: <https://lacountylibrary.org/music/>

- Log in to Freegal and explore all the different kinds of music genres and songs available to help create a playlist in the theme of jazz. Here is a list of other jazz artists both past and present:
 - Ella Fitzgerald
 - Miles Davis
 - John Coltrane
 - Esperanza Spalding
 - Astrud Gilberto
- For more inspiration, check out this pre-made playlist with some Bessie’s Smith greatest Hits: <https://tinyurl.com/bdfv6t4d>

Happy Listening!