

## PART 1

In 1923 - there was a woman who set the musical tone of the decade and the jazz age that followed. Her name was Bessie Smith, and her story is literally a maze of myth and legend. Fantastic - and false - tales so reflective of their time, they seem inevitable, and mundane truths so obscure - we may never know exactly what happened.

We can learn a lot though, about the personal life of an artist through her music, and Bessie Smith left her soul on 160 - 78 rpm lacquer discs - for everyone to experience.

And no matter what genre Smith sang – from the first recording – to the last - it was all tinged with the blues.

From a young age, it seems Bessie Smith was destined to become one of the great singers of all time.

She was born in Chattanooga TN, in 1894. Both her parents had died by the time Smith was nine.

When she was around ten - Smith and her brother Andrew began busking for pennies - in front of the White Elephant Saloon at Thirteenth and Elm in Chattanooga.

Her older brother Clarence - also a musician - slipped away and joined the Moses Stokes Traveling Show.

Had Bessie been a little older she would've probably gone with him, but a few years later - in 1912 - Clarence arranged an audition for his little sister – and she was ironically - hired as a dancer not a singer – likely because another singer - Ma Rainey - was already in the company.

This is where the Bessie Smith myth begins. Rumors circulated for years that Ma Rainey had kidnapped Bessie Smith and groomed her as a singer.

The back-fence gossip suggested that Rainey taught Smith to sing.

None of it's true. The two were friends - and competitors - and Rainey did help Smith develop a stage presence. It was good for the show- and for Smith who formed her own act around 1913 opening at Atlanta's 81 Theater for \$10 a week.

By 1920 she was already well established across the south and southern east coast.

Bessie Smith kept no roots in the south... Where many southern singers rarely traveled north of the Mason Dixon line, Smith happily ventured north to new audiences that other singers never knew.

She spent a year in Atlantic City singing with northern jazz musicians.

That same year - 1920 - she heard Mamie Smith's - "Crazy Blues." After learning that it had sold hundreds of thousands of records – Smith saw a new model for a career in music - one that would make her a superstar.

She auditioned for three record companies, who all thought she was too loud, too rough – lowdown, low class - or as Thomas Edison himself put it – “no good.”

She auditioned for Harry Pace's "Black Swan Records," and was turned down when she stopped singing to spit.

The board of Black Swan - the first black owned and operated record label – included W. E. B. DuBois – founder of the NAACP who was mortified at Smith's behavior.

Race records were a conundrum to the NAACP, and many middle class black families, who understandably wanted to leave the memories of work songs, minstrelsy, slavery and Jim Crow in the past.

They were all shocked when Bessie Smith became the most successful singer of the 1920s. But it was – to some anyway – the coarseness of her music and personality - that was the appeal.

When she auditioned for Frank Walker at Columbia he described her as – “anything but a singer. She looked about seventeen – tall, fat and scared to death – just awful. But all this you forgot when you heard her sing.”

And singing is what Frank Walker had in mind for Bessie Smith.

On the 15th of Feb 1923 - Smith recorded - "Down Hearted Blues" and "Gulf Coast Blues." They were released as an A and B side - on the regular A – Series catalogue. Columbia hadn't yet developed a Race records division.

It didn't matter where they were released. "Down Hearted Blues" – sold 750K copies in the first six months.

Bessie Smith was an instant force to be reckoned with.

She was six feet tall and weighed 200 pounds. Her voice was even bigger. She could bully other artists especially if she felt slighted. She fought – sometimes physically – for what she felt belonged to her. And though she was known as a hard drinking woman of the world, some who knew her still called her childlike and innocent at times.

Perhaps Smith wanted to be childlike - but became a tough, and sometimes violent woman – because that's what it took to be an independent black woman in the 20s.

It's all there in her recordings. The heartbreak of the blues - and abusive relationships, the sarcasm, humor and irony of vaudeville and minstrelsy, along with the sophistication of jazz.

Bessie Smith somehow managed to balance all these elements – to create perfection.

Who else could sing about a woman in love with a ghost, 'cause she liked the rattle of his bones - and unlike other men - she always knew where to find him.

"Cemetery Blues," was the first record released when Columbia set up their new Race Catalogue.

Smith's career was on fire.

Columbia's publicity department crowned her "Queen of the blues," but the national press upgraded her status to Empress, and her personal life changed too.

Just as that first record was being released in 1923 - she met and married Jack Gee – a security guard.

The marriage was difficult, but Gee did like the money his wife made. Smith became one of the top performing stars of the decade traveling in a custom built 72 ft. railroad car – and dominating TOBA - the Theater Owners Booking Association – as its top draw.

The show she headlined featured as many as 40 members in the cast.

On October 5th, 1923 – after playing an all-white theater in Memphis - Smith performed a late-night concert on WMC radio.

WMC – was managed by George D Hay – a forward thinker and innovator - who would go on to create the Grand Ole Opry at WSM in Nashville - the longest running radio show in history.

Bessie Smith's appearance live in the WMC studio – made her one of the first black artist to appear on radio in the deeply segregated south – integrating the station's studio at a time when black musicians weren't even allowed in the facility.

The broadcast was heard far and wide and helped make Smith a star.

Suddenly wealthy - by the end of the 1920s - Smith had made more money than any black artist in history - and she spent as fast as it came in. So did Jack Gee - who began producing shows himself.

When Smith learned he was having an affair with Gertrude Saunders – a singer in one of those shows – Smith took matters into her own hands - literally.

She beat Saunders up - twice - and though she was charged with assault, Smith came out on top. Saunders left town for good.

Needless to say, the marriage was over – though Smith and Gee - never legally divorced.

Considering all of that - it's no wonder Bessie Smith songs were often about men who mistreated their women. She was often involved with men who stole from her and abused her. Now on her own - Smith moved to Philadelphia and became an urban woman of independent means.

People admired her for it – but her records sold in part because - somewhere in black urban culture there was a place that missed the rustic elements of the south.

Not the slavery and Jim Crow of course – but the wide-open space of the land – and the mystery of southern myth, legend and voodoo - that just wasn't present in urban America.

They were never going back to the south because of Jim Crow – but they could visit vicariously through song.

Bessie Smith recorded W.C. Handy's – Yellow Dog Blues with Fletcher Henderson's Hot Six - including Coleman Hawkins, Charlie Green and Charlie Dixon.

The song is about goin where the southern cross the dog – otherwise known as the crossroad - the place where secret deals with the devil were made.

“Yellow Dog,” - was a callback to that southern mystery that northern life lacked.

In spite of her success, Smith's life was lacking too.

Between her husband's affairs, bootlegged gin, and life on the road – Smith was learning that wealth and fame weren't the solution she'd hoped for.

It all became irrelevant in 1929. The high life as a rich and famous singer came to a crashing end along with the stock market. People couldn't buy food much less pay for records or entertainment.

Suddenly for Bessie Smith it was all gone – the music – the money - the husband.

All that was left was the booze.

Columbia dropped her in 1931 citing the great depression and changing taste in music. Blues was down and out and swing was rising fast.

She recorded four sides for John Hammond at Okeh records in 1933 – including some of her best known works “Do Your Duty” and “Gimme A Pigfoot and a Bottle of Beer...” songs that bridge the gap between blues and swing.

In the band for those sessions were swing legends -Jack Teagarden, Chu Berry, and Benny Goodman who was recording was recording with Ethel Waters next door, and just dropped in.

John Hammond claimed to have found Smith working as a hostess in a speakeasy on Ridge Avenue in Philly. But like some of his other claims - this one isn't true either. She was still touring in 1933 when Hammond recorded what would turn out to be her final records.

The Great Depression and bouts with alcoholism made it hard for Smith to find work. But she kept at it - kept playing gigs where she could find them.

It was driving to one of those gigs in Darling Mississippi - that launched what is likely the most mythic and controversial legend surrounding Bessie Smith's life.

It's possibly the most famous legend in all of American music.

On September 26, 1937 Bessie Smith and Richard Morgan a Chicago club owner, sometimes bootlegger, and the singer's common law husband, were driving to Darling Mississippi.

Smith had returned to Beale Street a few weeks earlier to appear in “Broadway Rastus,” an old-style minstrel show featuring comedians, dancers, showgirls and music.

The company finished their run in Memphis and Smith and Morgan left in the middle of the night - according to accounts headed to Darling Mississippi for a gig. Whether they were going to rejoin the “Rastus,” company in Vicksburg is unclear.

What we do know is somewhere on US Highway 61 - between Lyon and Lula, Mississippi - with Morgan at the wheel - they were involved in a serious auto accident - spawning what would become one of the most famous fabrications in all of music history.

The story of the accident was covered across the nation the next day - but virtually every version was a cut and paste of a four-paragraph article from the Memphis Commercial Appeal - which simply stated that the vehicle had overturned killing the 50-year-old singer.

That was that.

Except, a month later though, a salacious story in Downbeat Magazine - written by legendary Jazz critic John Hammond - stated that an injured, but still alive Bessie Smith - had been taken to the leading white hospital in Memphis, where they refused to admit her because she was black - leaving her to bleed out and die as a result.

As you can imagine - the story went viral. It was even made into a one act play by Edward Albee called, "The Death Of Bessie Smith."

There's just one problem.

None of it's true.

She wasn't even taken to Memphis - some 60 miles to north, the closest hospital was in Clarksdale - only 8 miles south of the accident.

So why has such an horrific story - persisted for nearly a century now?

Well anyone who's ever lived in the southern United States can tell you that it just feels like it would be true.

Similar events are still occurring – there are plenty of people today who treat the lives of African Americans with the same kind of casual indifference the Bessie Smith story describes – It's probably why John Hammond believed the story when he heard it - likely from Bessie Smith's adopted son Jack Gee Jr. who claimed he got it from - Richard Morgan - the driver of the car.

But if the John Hammond story isn't true - what actually did happen - is nearly as unbelievable as the false story.

And that's where we'll pick up next time on Blues Alley - the Founding Mothers.

## PART 2

Bessie Smith had rocketed to fame on radio and records in the 1920s. But like the rest of her colleagues in Classic Blues - the Great Depression put a serious dent - if not an outright coffin nail in their careers.

Smith still plugging away as a working singer - was performing in a minstrel style show called "Broadway Rastus," in Memphis.

When the show closed Smith and Richard Morgan - her common law husband headed to Darling, Mississippi. On the way, they were involved in a devastating car crash - that claimed the life of Bessie Smith.

Newspapers across the nation carried the story her death - largely copying the Memphis Commercial Appeal - who first reported the story.

A month later, a salacious story in Downbeat Magazine - written by critic and record producer John Hammond - stated that an injured, but still alive Bessie Smith - had been taken to the leading white hospital in Memphis, where they refused to admit her because she was black - leaving her to bleed out and die as a result.

The story - which likely came from Smith's adopted son Jack Gee Jr. - went viral.

There's just one problem - none of it's true.

If the salacious and best-known story of Bessie Smith's death is untrue - what actually did happen?

Well nearly a century later - it's hard to be certain, but over the years several verifiable facts have come to light.

What we know now from piecing together decades of research - is that a truck carrying the US mail - and the morning papers - was either parked on the shoulder or reentering the two-lane Highway 61.

Highway 61 through the delta is a long, flat, stretch of very narrow pavement - where speeds often reached whatever the vehicle could do.

As recently as dawn of the twenty-first century - Highway 61 - between Memphis and the casinos in Tunica, MS - was dubbed by locals as Death Row - for the staggering number of fatal car crashes that occurred there. It's since been widened into a divided highway - dramatically reducing the number of accidents.

But in 1937 - and because the delta is so flat and dark - and the road was so narrow - depth perception became impaired. It was hard to tell what was actually on the road and what was a farm vehicle in the nearby fields.

Judging from accounts of the accident - Morgan was likely going all out when they came up on the truck. Morgan swerved, but lost control and hit rear of the truck side on - at speed. Smith who had been riding with her arm out the passenger side window took the brunt of the collision, which sheared the top off her Packard causing it to flip over - as reported in the Memphis paper.

The truck driver then drove away.

For decades that and John Hammonds fictional account were the end of the story - all anyone knew about it.

It would take more than 30 years to confirm what happened next on that fateful morning, and the best and most reliable account - is from Dr. Hugh Smith, a surgeon, witness and participant in the events of that night.

Dr. Hugh Smith and his friend Henry Broughton – were on a fishing trip, when they were flagged down by Morgan around 2AM.

When Dr. Smith got to Bessie Smith she was lying in the middle of Highway 61. Her right arm had been nearly severed at the elbow - in what Dr. Smith called a traumatic amputation.

Broughton and Dr. Smith moved her to the shoulder of the highway - out of the way of high speed traffic - which was still passing the scene. Smith was bleeding badly, so the doctor applied a tourniquet.

The only light he had was the headlights from his car, and though he could tell she had serious internal injuries Bessie Smith was – at this point - still conscious.

Dr. Smith dispatched Broughton to a nearby farm house to call an ambulance – and while they were waiting for it to arrive – Bessie Smith went into shock.

Twenty-five minutes later - still no ambulance - Dr. Smith decided to take the singer to the hospital in his own car. While he and Broughton were removing the fishing tackle to make room for Smith - a passing car smashed into his vehicle at high speed.

The Doctor's car was sent careening into Bessie Smith's overturned Packard, completely destroying both vehicles.

The new car on the scene – ricocheted off the Doctor's car then slammed into a ditch – almost taking out Broughton and Bessie Smith who were still on the shoulder of the highway at that point.

To make matters worse - Dr. Smith's car - their only source of light was now gone.

As the doctor was checking out the latest accident victims – the police and two ambulances arrived - the one Broughton had called - and a Clarksdale ambulance sent by the truck driver who had stopped and reported the accident.

By the time first responders arrived Bessie Smith was unconscious.

There was no mix up with the white hospital or the wrong ambulance.

Dr. Smith confirmed to researchers that - no one in the deep south at the time would've called a white ambulance for Smith in the first place, and even if they had - no ambulance would have



taken a black patient to a white hospital. As horrible as it sounds today - It just wasn't acceptable under Jim Crow.

Many places in the south wouldn't allow black patients in ambulances at all, so the ambulance that arrived for Bessie Smith was a hearse.

Southern black hospitals often couldn't afford ambulances – so hearses - provided by funeral homes were used to transport patients.

In addition to the disregard and disrespect of life - shown by sending a hearse, Southern blacks were afraid to get in one – at all. It was widely believed - there were songs written about it - that a hearse would pick up injured black victims, and on the way to the hospital – the “ambulance crew,” would administer a fatal injection.

When the victim arrived at emergency, they had no pulse so the body was taken to the funeral home.

It's hard to imagine today - but it was believed at the time - because the funeral home didn't make any money from ambulance services – they made their money selling funerals.

So, it was in their interest to create a funeral.

If they couldn't sell the family a service and burial - they charged them a fee equal to the cost of a funeral for transporting and storing the body.

It was all a scam - one that made the trust relationship between helpers and those who needed help difficult if not impossible.

Regardless of lore and legend though - the hearse driver Willie George Miller, who worked for L. P. Gibson Funeral home was later found by researchers - and recalled driving the singer to G. T. Thomas Afro American Hospital in Clarksdale. (Today it's the Riverside Hotel).

And it's not anything resembling a hospital that we'd recognize today. It's little more than a house.

Word of mouth isn't the only evidence. The location - the Afro American Hospital is confirmed on Smith's death certificate.

If there were ever any medical records kept of Smith's treatment at the hospital they're long lost.

But according to the death certificate Smith was treated for shock, internal injuries and a comminuted fracture of the arm – broken in multiple places - between the radius and ulna.

It also notes that her right arm was amputated by surgery at the hospital.

It wasn't enough though. Bessie Smith died later that morning from her injuries.

Time of Death – was 11:30 AM, and lists her as married, and her occupation as – Artist.

The Dr. W. H. Brandon – who signed the death certificate stated that Morgan was “very drunk.”

This seems to be untrue also, as other witnesses including Dr. Smith contradict that statement.

As for the truck driver who drove away. He wasn't running away. He did go for help. His report to authorities led to the second ambulance that arrived on the scene.

So why did he leave the scene?

It was commonly believed at the time - that any vehicle transporting U.S. Mail couldn't be stopped or delayed – even by emergency vehicles. There have been legal challenges in several states over the issue - which claims all federal vehicles have the right of way – so it's possible the truck driver acted on that assumption. The fact that he went straight to authorities supports this belief.

There's also a long-standing theory that had help arrived sooner Bessie Smith could've been saved.

Again, Dr. Smith contradicts that as well, telling researchers - in his opinion as a medical professional - that even a modern-day trauma center couldn't have saved her - the crushing injuries were just too severe.

Bessie Smith was buried in Philadelphia.

Her grave went unmarked until 1970.

Smith's friends and family had raised money several times to buy her a headstone – but Jack Gee absconded with the funds each time. Finally just before her own death - singer Janis Joplin bought Bessie Smith a headstone - it reads “The Greatest Blues Singer in the World Will Never Stop Singing.”

Alberta Hunter - a superb singer in her own right, called Bessie Smith the greatest blues singer of all time.

Mahalia Jackson recounts standing in line to hear her sing... so impressed she wouldn't leave the theater until they closed up for the night.

It's said Bix Beiderbecke - the legendary Jazz trumpeter – once threw a week's salary at her feet just to keep her singing.

Sinatra, Billie Holiday and Janis Joplin all listed Smith as an influence.

Though she was the highest paid black entertainer of the 20s – by her death she was barely making ends meet.

But economics isn't really her legacy.

Like Mamie Smith and Ma Rainey before her – Bessie Smith challenged the social norms of womanhood in black America.

Her stand for equality, freedom, and her sexuality has become a role model for parts of the LGBTQ community – as well as many other minority groups.

Fortunately, we can still see Bessie Smith sing as well as listen to her.

In 1929 Smith appeared in an early sound picture – a two-reel short called “St Louis Blues.” It's the only known film footage of the singer. She'd had a hit with the song “St Louis Blues,” in 1925. That earlier version of the most recorded blues song of all time - is simple - featuring only Smith on vocals, Louis Armstrong on trumpet and Fred Longshaw on organ.

The film version on the other hand is lavish - and presented a look at African American life that would have confounded most blacks.

In the film Bessie Smith - a poor working woman - is cheated on, knocked down, and after a pretended reconciliation - ultimately robbed by her lover.

Today the story is considered derisive, but the plot and the stereotyping - closely follow the lyric of Handy's song.

And this dark story - that ironically sounds angelic in places - is a musical dichotomy - accompanied on screen - by the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra, the Hall Johnson Choir, and James P. Johnson string section.

The film is important though. It shows Bessie Smith as a musical force - the harmonies are stunning and it's one of the earliest films to show black life in America - even if it is a derisive stereotypical look.

And it laid the foundation for black films in America.

Today the film is on the National Register of Historic Films.

Mark Cantor - in an article for the Library of Congress calls it - "Seriously flawed, but absolutely essential.

There's a link to the complete film in the episode notes so you can decide for yourself.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2023602002/>

Bessie Smith was honored on a postage stamp in 1994.

Edward Albee wrote a 1959 play called "The Death of Bessie Smith."

Three of her records - Downhearted Blues, St Louis Blues, Empty Bed Blues are in the Grammy Hall of Fame.

Downhearted Blues is listed on the Library of Congress - National Recording Registry, the RIAA Songs of the Century List, the National Endowment of the Arts, and the Rock n Roll hall of fame's 500 songs that shaped rock n roll.

Smith was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame in 1980 - and the Rock n Roll Hall of Fame in 1989.

To appreciate Bessie Smith though - you really gotta listen to her records. She recorded a hundred and sixty of them.

So - as usual - we've included a link to the Bessie Smith - Founding Mothers Playlist so you can hear all the music from this episode and more.

**BESSIE SMITH – THE FOUNDING MOTHERS PLAYLIST**

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6tfJf8B8GhCbR3BaAqwiKz?si=0b6fd8b2d79b4cdf>

**ST LOUIS BLUES - FILM**

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2023602002/>

