Smith, Bessie

Smith, Bessie (b. April 15, 1898?, Chattanooga, Tenn., U.S.--d. Sept. 26, 1937, Clarksdale, Miss.), U.S. singer, one of the greatest of blues singers.

Born into a poor black family, she began to sing in childhood and was helped into a professional status of sorts through the patronage of the first of the great blues singers, Ma Rainey. For several years she travelled through the Southern states, learning her craft in the saloons and smaller theatres of Atlanta, Savannah, Birmingham, and Memphis. She was eventually discovered by the pianist-composer Clarence Williams, a representative of Columbia Records, and made her first recording in February 1923.

Bessie Smith's subject matter was the classic material of the blues: poverty and oppression, love--mostly unrequited--and stoic acceptance of defeat at the hands of a cruel and indifferent world. The great tragedy of her career was that she outlived the topicality of her idiom. For the last few years of her life her record sales and her fame diminished as social forces changed the face of popular music and bowdlerized the earthy realism of the sentiments she expressed in her music. Her gradually increasing alcoholism caused managements to become wary of engaging her, but there is no evidence that her actual singing ability ever declined.

Bessie Smith became known in her lifetime as the "Empress of the Blues," and some idea of the effect she had on her hearers can be found in the recordings she made of well over 150 songs, usually with small groups and outstanding instrumentalists, including Louis Armstrong, Fletcher Henderson, and Benny Goodman. A bold, supremely confident artist who often disdained the use of a microphone, she was a woman of some physical beauty whose art expressed the frustrations and hopes of a whole generation of black Americans. Her tall figure and upright stance, above all her handsome features, are preserved in a short motion picture, St. Louis Blues (1929), banned for its realism and now preserved in the Museum of Modern Art, New York City. She died from injuries sustained in a road accident. It was said that, had she been white, she would have received earlier medical treatment, thus saving her life, and Edward Albee made this the subject of his play The Death of Bessie Smith (1960).

BIBLIOGRAPHY.