BESSIE SMITH
CHATTANOOGA GAL
4 CD SET
Bessie Smith's big, beautiful voice and emotionally naked interpretation made her into one of the all-time stars of the gramophone record, influencing talents as wide ranging as Billie Holiday, Mahalia Jackson and Janis Joplin.

DISC ONE:
1. DOWN HEARTED BLUES
2. GULF COAST BLUES
3. BEALE STREET MAMA
4. BABY WON'T YOU PLEASE COME HOME
5. 'TAIN'T NOBODY'S BIZNESS IF I DO
6. BLEEDING HEARTED BLUES
7. LADY LUCK BLUES
8. MIDNIGHT BLUES
9. WHOA, TILLIE, TAKE YOUR TIME
10. ANY WOMAN'S BLUES
11. CHICAGO BOUND BLUES
12. MOONSHINE BLUES
13. WORK HOUSE BLUES
14. HOUSE RENT BLUES
15. RAINY WEATHER BLUES
16. WEEPING WILLOW BLUES
17. THE BYE BYE BLUES
18. SINFUL BLUES
19. DYING GAMBLER'S BLUES
20. THE ST. LOUIS BLUES
21. RECKLESS BLUES
22. SOBBIN' HEARTED BLUES
23. COLD IN HAND BLUES

DISC TWO:
1. YOU'VE BEEN A GOOD OL' WAGON
2. CAKE WALKIN' BABIES (FROM HOME)
3. THE YELLOW DOG BLUES
4. SOFT PEDAL BLUES
5. CARELESS LOVE BLUES
6. NASHVILLE WOMAN'S BLUES
7. J.C. HOLMES BLUES
8. I AIN'T GONNA PLAY SECOND FIDDLE
9. HE'S GONE BLUES
10. I AIN'T GOT NOBODY
11. I'VE BEEN MISTREATED AND I DON'T LIKE IT
12. RED MOUNTAIN BLUES
13. GOLDEN RULE BLUES
14. LONESOME DESERT BLUES
15. THEM "HAS BEEN" BLUES
16. SQUEEZE ME
17. WHAT'S THE MATTER NOW?
18. I WANT EVERY BIT OF IT
19. JAZZBO BROWN FROM MEMPHIS TOWN
20. THE GIN HOUSE BLUES
21. MONEY BLUES
22. BABY DOLL
23. HARD DRIVING PAPA
24. LOST YOUR HEAD BLUES

DISC THREE:
1. HARD TIME BLUES
2. HONEY MAN BLUES
3. ONE AND TWO BLUES
4. YOUNG WOMAN'S BLUES
5. PREACHIN' THE BLUES
6. BACKWATER BLUES
7. AFTER YOU'VE GONE
8. ALEXANDER'S RAGTIME BAND
9. MUDDY WATER (A MISSISSIPPI MOAN)
10. THERE'LL BE A HOT TIME IN THE OLD TOWN TONIGHT
11. TROMBONE CHOLLY
12. SEND ME TO THE 'LECTRIC CHAIR
13. SWEET MISTREATER
14. LOCK AND KEY
15. A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND
16. DYIN' BY THE HOUR
17. FOOLISH MAN BLUES
18. THINKING BLUES
19. I USED TO BE YOUR SWEET MAMA
20. SPIDER MAN BLUES
21. EMPTY BED BLUES, PT 1
22. EMPTY BED BLUES, PT 2
23. PUT IT RIGHT HERE (OR KEEP IT OUT THERE)
24. YES INDEED HE DO!

DISC FOUR:
1. DEVIL'S GONNA GIT YOU
2. POOR MAN'S BLUES
3. PLEASE HELP ME GET HIM OUT OF MY MIND
4. ME AND MY GIN
5. I'M WILD ABOUT THAT THING
6. KITCHEN MAN
7. I'VE GOT WHAT IT TAKES (BUT IT BREAKS MY HEART TO GIVE IT AWAY)
8. NOBODY KNOWS YOU WHEN YOU'RE DOWN AND OUT
9. HE'S GOT ME GOIN'
10. IT MAKES MY LOVE COME DOWN
11. DIRTY NO-GOODERS BLUES
12. BLUE SPIRIT BLUES
13. YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND
14. DON'T CRY BABY
15. BABY HAVE PITY ON ME
16. ON REVIVAL DAY
17. HUSTLIN' DAN
18. BLACK MOUNTAIN BLUES
19. NEED A LITTLE SUGAR IN MY BOWL
20. SAFETY MAMA
21. DO YOUR DUTY
22. GIMME A PIGFOOT
23. TAKE ME FOR A BUGGY RIDE
24. I'M DOWN IN THE DUMPS
BESSIE SMITH
CHATTANOOGA GAL
Disc One: Down Hearted Blues

1. DOWN HEARTED BLUES Hunter, Austin ©1923
2. GULF COAST BLUES Williams ©1923
3. BEALE STREET MAMA Turk, Robinson ©1923
4. BABY WON'T YOU PLEASE COME HOME Williams, Warfield ©1923
5. 'TAIN'T NOBODY'S BIZNESS IF I DO Austin, Robinson ©1923
6. BLEEDING HEARTED BLUES Austin ©1923
7. LADY LUCK BLUES Weber, Williams ©1923
8. MIDNIGHT BLUES Thompson, Williams ©1923
9. WHOA, TILLIE, TAKE YOUR TIME Layton, Creamer ©1923
10. ANY WOMAN’S BLUES Austin ©1923
11. CHICAGO BOUND BLUES Austin ©1923
12. MOONSHINE BLUES Rainey ©1924
13. WORK HOUSE BLUES Wallace ©1924
14. HOUSE RENT BLUES Wallace ©1924
15. RAINY WEATHER BLUES Brooks ©1924
16. WEEPING WILLOW BLUES Carter ©1924
17. THE BYE BYE BLUES Carter ©1924
18. SINFUL BLUES Redford ©1925
19. DYING GAMBLER’S BLUES Gee ©1925
20. THE ST. LOUIS BLUES Handy ©1925
21. RECKLESS BLUES Smith ©1925
22. SOBRIN’ HEARTED BLUES Bradford, Layer, Davis ©1925
23. COLD IN HAND BLUES Gee, Longshaw ©1925

Disc Two: Careless Love Blues

1. YOU’VE BEEN A GOOD OLE WAGON Smith, Balcom ©1925
2. CAKE WALKIN’ BABIES (FROM HOME) Smith, Troy, Williams ©1925
3. THE YELLOW DOG BLUES Handy ©1925
4. SOFT PEDAL BLUES Smith ©1925
5. CARELESS LOVE BLUES Handy, Williams, Koenig ©1925
6. NASHVILLE WOMAN’S BLUES Longshaw ©1925
7. J.C. HOLMES BLUES Hurley ©1925
8. I AIN’T GON'T TO PLAY SECOND FIDDLE Bradford ©1925
9. HE’S GONE BLUES Smith ©1925
10. I AINT’GOT NOBODY Graham, Williams ©1925
11. I’VE BEEN MISTREATED AND I DON’T LIKE IT Longshaw ©1925
12. RED MOUNTAIN BLUES Troy ©1925
13. GOLDEN RULE BLUES Smith ©1925
14. LONESOME DESERT BLUES Smith ©1925
15. THEM 'HAS BEEN’ BLUES Skidmore, Waller ©1926
16. SQUEEZE ME Williams, Waller ©1926
17. WHAT’S THE MATTER NOW? Williams, Williams ©1926
18. I WANT EVERY BIT OF IT Williams, Williams ©1926
19. JAZZBO BROWN FROM MEMPHIS TOWN Brooks ©1926
20. THE GIN HOUSE BLUES Troy, Henderson ©1926
21. MONEY BLUES Leaders, Elder ©1926
22. BABY DOLL Smith, Williams ©1926
23. HARD DRIVING PAPA Brooks ©1926
24. LOST YOUR HEAD BLUES Smith ©1926
Bessie Smith

Disc Three: Young Woman Blues

1. HARD TIME BLUES  Smith ©1926
2. HONEY MAN BLUES  Brooks ©1926
3. ONE AND TWO BLUES  Brooks ©1926
4. YOUNG WOMAN'S BLUES  Smith ©1926
5. PREACHIN' THE BLUES  Smith ©1927
6. BACKWATER BLUES  Smith ©1927
7. AFTER YOU'VE GONE  Layton, Creamer ©1927
8. ALEXANDER'S RAGTIME BAND  Berlin ©1927
9. MUDDY WATER (A MISSISSIPPI MOAN)  De Rose, Richman, Trent ©1927
10. THERE'LL BE A HOT TIME IN THE OLD TOWN TONIGHT  Mctz, Hayden ©1927
11. TRUMPET CHOLLY  Brooks, Johnson ©1927
12. SEND ME TO THE ELECTRIC CHAIR  Smith ©1927
13. SWEET MISTREATEN  Creamer, Johnson ©1927
14. LOCK AND KEY  Creamer, Johnson ©1927
15. A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND  Green ©1927
16. THINKING BLUES  Smith ©1927

17. 1 USED TO BE YOUR SWEET MAMA  Miller, Longshaw ©1928
18. SPIDER MAN BLUES  Smith, Gray ©1928
19. EMPTY BED BLUES, PT 1  Johnson ©1928
20. EMPTY BED BLUES, PT 2  Johnson ©1928
21. PUT IT RIGHT HERE (OR KEEP IT OUT THERE)  Grainger ©1926
22. YES INDEED HE DO!  Grainger ©1928

Compiled and produced for release by Joop Visser.
Digital remastering by PeterSynnace at Tall Order Mastering.
Design by Raven Design.
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Bessie Smith

Disc Four: Me & My Gin

1. DEVIL'S GONNA GIT YOU  Grainger ©1928
2. POOR MAN'S BLUES  Smith ©1928
3. PLEASE HELP ME GET HIM OUT OF MY MIND  Smith ©1928
4. ME AND MY GIN  Brooks ©1928
5. I'M WILD ABOUT THAT THING  Williams ©1928
6. KITCHEN MAN  Razaf, Bellas ©1929
7. I'VE GOT WHAT IT TAKES (BUT IT BREAKS MY HEART TO GIVE IT AWAY)  Williams, Jenkins ©1929
8. NOBODY KNOWS YOU WHEN YOU'RE DOWN AND OUT  Cox ©1929
9. HE'S GOT ME GOIN'  Gray ©1929
10. IT MAKES MY LOVE COME DOWN  Smith ©1929
11. DIRTY NO-GOODERS BLUES  Smith ©1929
12. BLUE SPIRIT BLUES  Williams ©1929
13. YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND  Williams, Johnson ©1929
14. DON'T CRY BABY  Unger, Sael, Johnson ©1929
15. BABY HAVE PITY ON ME  Moll, Williams ©1930
16. ON REVIVAL DAY  Razaf ©1930
17. HUSTLIN' DAN  Crawford ©1930
18. BLACK MOUNTAIN BLUES  Cole ©1930
19. NEED A LITTLE SUGAR IN MY BOWL  Williams, Small, Brymn ®1931
20. SAFETY MAMA  Smith ©1931
21. DO YOUR DUTY  Wilson ©1933
22. GIMME A PIGFOOT  Wilson ©1933
23. TAKE ME FOR A BUGGY RIDE  Wilson, Wilson ©1933
24. I'M DOWN IN THE DUMPS  Wilson, Wilson ©1933

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There is no exact time and place at which the blues originated but its evolution was derived from a blend of different musical forms, black and white, during the latter part of the 19th century. Initially the blues was a rural music, built on plantation and work songs, traditional ballads and tunes, blending in the popular and religious. From unaccompanied to string band, the songs and music that turned into the blues took a variety of forms from region to region, from Virginia around to Texas, and even though it became standardized as a 12-bar form with a repetitive pattern, much variety came under its name.

This music remained unnoticed outside of the South until its influence began to widen through publication in a written and refined form of such works as W.C. Handy's 'Memphis Blues' (1912) and 'St. Louis Blues'. After the earlier ragtime style, with piano pieces as by Scott Joplin, first attracted commercial and artistic response from a wide audience, jazz, music with an important blues component, appeared first on record in 1917.

As the recording industry opened up and found new growing white and black audiences it was obvious that the range of recorded music widened from its original scope of operas and classical pieces. Mamie Smith, a black vaudeville singer from Cincinnati, recorded "This Thing Called Love" and "You Can't Keep A Good Man Down" for the Okeh label in 1920. In spite of a jazz backing, these sides were not blues, but the record sold enough to warrant a follow up. This was "Crazy Blues", a blues in name only. "Crazy Blues" sold in large quantities, sending a very strong signal
to the burgeoning record industry. Soon every record company had a coloured girl recording the blues, although these singers were in many cases mere pop singers like Mamie Smith.

The first talent source that was tapped by record companies were Negro vaudeville and the travelling show circuit, producing the first wave of what is usually termed "classic blues singers", who were predominantly female.

Negro vaudeville's influence on jazz and blues was a substantial one, as it was largely in the tent shows and dime theatres of the lower class Negro that the gap between folk music and sophisticated song was bridged. In fact all the great "classic" blues singers of the first quarter of the 20th century, Ma Rainey, Sippie Wallace, Ida Cox and Bertha Hill, to mention a few, made their reputations and their livelihoods with the little "minstrel" companies which toured the small towns of the South and mid-West, until finally they were able to secure engagements in the principal Northern cities. The material they used was not inhibited by any notions of what was artistic, acceptable or classifiable as blues. They sang the music of their people, folk blues, sixteen bar stomp, the songs of W.C. Handy and Spencer Williams, and when inspired to do so, they wrote their own.

Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, a portly woman with an oddly charming gold-toothed smile was the first known female blues singer. Hers was not the spontaneous, improvised blues singing of the field worker. Although the singing was heartfelt and sincere, Ma Rainey was an entertainer with a public. Diamonds glittered at her fingers, gold pieces hung around her neck and combs were thrust in her wild frizzy hair. Ma Rainey was given to flashes of temper and jealousy but there was kindness in her eyes and warmth in her generous smile. Ma Rainey came from Columbus, Georgia where she was born in 1886. Like the majority of the classic blues singers she was raised in the South, and throughout her career she retained echoes of her folk heritage in her singing. She served her long apprenticeship touring in the backwoods districts, where she performed in makeshift tent theatres and second line halls in a vaudeville troupe called "The Rabbit Foot Minstrels". During one of her tours she played the town of Chattanooga, Tennessee. It was here that she discovered a twelve-year-old girl, just eight years her junior, whose talent she instantly recognized and encouraged. The girl was Bessie Smith.

Bessie Smith was born on April 15, 1894, in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Her father was William Smith, a labourer and part-time Baptist preacher, her mother was Laura, who looked after the seven children in the Smith family. Bessie's father died before she was old enough to remember him and by the age of eight she lost her mother and one of her brothers as well.

Viola Smith, Bessie's oldest sister now raised what was left of the family in a one room wooden shack on Charles Street in the Blue Goose area of Chattanooga. Viola took in laundry in order to feed the dirt poor Smith children. Bessie's oldest brother Clarence helped Viola by taking any odd job he could find. Clarence had always shown an interest in the theatre and in 1904 he left Chattanooga with a travelling troupe, which he had joined as a master of ceremonies. Clarence's entry into show business made young Bessie determined to follow in her older brother's footsteps one day.

In 1903, when Bessie was only nine she entered the weekly amateur show at Chattanooga's Ivory Theatre. While Bessie attended the West Main Street School, she often performed in the streets after school and at weekends. Accompanied on guitar by another brother, Andrew, Bessie could often be seen around Ninth Street, Chattanooga's hub of black night life.

Bessie and Andrew could also be heard in front of the White Elephant Saloon on Thirteenth and Elm in their own neighbourhood. Bessie danced and clowned and sang songs like "Bill Bailey Won't You Please Come Home", after
which the patrons showed their appreciation to the young Smith children with some coins thrown their way.

In 1912, brother Clarence returned to Chattanooga with the Moses Stokes Company, who played a number of shows at the Ivory Theatre at Ninth Street. Clarence persuaded the management of the troupe to give Bessie an audition. Bessie passed the audition and began her professional career as a dancer with the Moses Stokes troupe. Ma Rainey was the Moses Stokes troupe's resident vocalist.

The extent to which Gertrude Ma Rainey played a part in developing Bessie Smith's talents is still a matter of some debate. But what Bessie undoubtedly acquired from Ma Rainey was an ear for the broad, tragic quality of voice that made the difference between the true blues singers and more popular ballad stylists of the day, who only sang the blues occasionally. Although Bessie was to enrich the moans and finely controlled micro tonal nuances of the blue notes with an even greater expressive range, Ma Rainey had developed their essential quality by the time she met Bessie Smith.

It is unlikely that Ma Rainey taught Bessie all she knew, as the story used to run, but there is little doubt that Bessie would have learned all she could. Possessing a strong will and an obdurate disposition, Bessie apparently "cut out" on her own within a year or two after their first meeting.

This was later confirmed by Thomas A. Dorsey, the great gospel composer and one-time Ma Rainey accompanist, who recalled some fifty years later Bessie's time at Atlanta's "81" Theatre. "It was about 1913 or 1914 and Bessie was already a star in her own right, but she really got her start here at the "81", and don't recall Ma Rainey ever having taken credit for helping her."

By 1913 the "81" Theatre in Atlanta had become Bessie's base, from which she toured Mississippi, Alabama and Florida with Pete Wesley Florida Cotton Blossoms Minstrel Show and the Silas Green Minstrel Show, often in the chorus line. 1917 found Bessie in Selma, on the Alabama River, moaning the blues in a gin mill on the outskirts of the town, that same year she appeared at the Douglas Gilmore Theatre in Baltimore. During 1918 Bessie worked in a travelling road show and appeared in vaudeville in Indianapolis. In that same year she appeared as a singer, dancer and male impersonator in her own revue "Liberty Belles" for the TOBA, the Theatre Owner's Booking Agency, which for many Negro artists stood for "Tough on Black Artists."

By 1920, Bessie began to play venues in the North, as her reputation on the southern circuit grew. In early 1920 she worked at the Paradise Gardens in Atlantic City backed by the Charlie Johnson band. Later that year Bessie took up residence in Philadelphia, where she performed nightly at Horan's Madhouse Club on 11th and Poplar and eventually at the celebrated Standard Theatre. In 1921 Bessie teamed up with pianist, singer, dancer, composer, record producer and entrepreneur Clarence Williams in the show "How Come" at Philadelphia's Dunbar Theatre. Sidney Bechet played the part of a Chinese laundryman in this show, Mamie Smith's recording of "Crazy Blues" on the Okeh label had become the surprise million seller that initiated the blues craze. Record companies were now setting up "race record" divisions and were scrambling to sign up blues singing ladies in the hope of matching Mamie Smith's good fortune.

An early portrait of Bessie Smith.
In spite of the open season for female blues singers after Mamie Smith’s "Crazy Blues", it is puzzling that Bessie Smith recorded her first commercial recording session on February 15, 1923, two years after Mamie Smith’s successful recording. There have been persistent rumours based on certain publications at the time that Bessie recorded as far back as 1921, but no recordings that verify this have turned up. What is certain is that she auditioned for a number of record labels and executives including Thomas Edison and the Black Swan, Emerson and Okeh labels. She was turned down on all these occasions, because her voice was judged as "too rough".

There are a number of stories about how Bessie finally signed for the Columbia label, of which we quote the most publicized one. In 1923 Frank Walker had been appointed head of Columbia’s race records division. Walker claimed to have heard Bessie as far back as 1917, while she was singing in a dive in Selma, Alabama. In early February 1923, he asked Clarence Williams to find Bessie and bring her to New York. Williams duly located Bessie in Philadelphia and brought her up to the Columbia offices.

"Tall and fat and scared to death" is how Frank Walker later described Bessie’s appearance on her arrival in New York. On February 15, 1923, he brought Bessie into the recording studio, where she sang two songs into the horn, accompanied on piano by Clarence Williams. One of these songs was "Tain’t Nobody’s Business". No masters of these recordings survive as they were rejected for technical or artistic reasons. Bessie and Clarence Williams returned to the recording studio the next day to record three sides, of which "Down Hearted Blues" and "Gulf Coast Blues" comprised her debut release.

Bessie’s version of "Down Hearted Blues" may have been affected by nerves, but she eventually delivered a gripping version of the then current Alberta Hunter hit. Despite some tension, Bessie’s talent shines through and the unequivocal emotional thrust is already clearly there. Clarence Williams’s piano accompaniment is merely functional.

Released on June 7, 1923, "Downhearted Blues"/ "Gulf Coast Blues" was a very successful record that reportedly sold 800,000 copies within its first six months of release. Before Bessie’s first record had been released Frank Walker had Bessie back in the studio for three sessions in April 1923. "Beale Street Mama" is Bessie’s magnificent version of "See See Rider" with its splendidly timed final vocal chorus. "Baby Won’t You Please Come Home" was also recorded on that April 11, 1923 session, the song was not a blues but would become a staple of the classic jazz repertoire. The highlight of the April 23, 1923 session was undoubtedly Bessie’s spunky version of "Tain’t Nobody’s Bizness If I Do". Clarence Williams once more provided the piano accompaniment on these sides.

Bessie now discovered that Clarence Williams had pulled a fast one on her. Williams had given her the impression that she was under contract to Columbia, while in fact he had signed Bessie direct to himself and leased
Bessie's services to Columbia, enabling Williams to pocket half of Bessie's recording fee. A visit of Bessie and her boyfriend Jack Gee to Williams' office gave Bessie what she wanted. Williams voided the contract, freeing Bessie to sign direct to Columbia.

Bessie had met Jack Gee, a semi-literate night watchman, while working at Horan's Madhouse Club in Philadelphia. June 7, 1923 marked the day of release of Bessie's first record, but she also married Jack Gee that day in a quiet Philadelphia ceremony. The marriage would turn out to be a tempestuous relationship between two people whose characters were incompatible, Bessie the open-minded exuberant show business personality, and Jack the conservative homebody. Bessie and Jack did not go on honeymoon, as Bessie embarked on her first tour as Columbia Record's "Queen of the Blues", arranged by Frank Walker who now acted as Bessie's manager as well as her record producer. The tour was a short one, accompanied by her pianist Irving Johns, and with a rather conservative set of costumes, Bessie played the "81" Theatre in Atlanta, her old stomping ground, with great success and broke attendance records at Birmingham's Frolic Theatre and New Orleans' Lyric Theatre.

On June 14, 1923 Bessie recorded three new sides. She was accompanied on these sides by pianist Fletcher Henderson. Henderson had studied European art-music with his mother and went on to take a degree in chemistry, and mathematics at Atlanta University. After moving to New York in 1920, Henderson began to put together groups to back singers and would make his mark as the great bandleader and arranger a little later.

Henderson, a far better pianist than Clarence Williams, was obviously inspired by Bessie and made his best recordings as a pianist with her. His bright, clear tone and bouncy rhythmic style were the perfect foil for the heavier, thicker sonority of Bessie's voice. Henderson's accompaniments must have
inspired Bessie as she displays a fuller, more commanding tone on songs like "Bleeding Hearted Blues", on which she invests the banal words with dignity and meaning, "Lady Luck Blues" and "Midnight Blues".

Bessie and Jack now settled into an apartment in Philadelphia, a base in between the continuous tours, which now took in Northern cities like Detroit and Cleveland and the regular recording sessions in New York. Bessie's October 15, 1923 session produced "Whoa, Tillie, Take Your Time". A departure from the blues, this was a double-entendre vaudeville number which Bessie performed with gusto. A day after this session, Bessie was back with the blues, with her glorious version of "Any Woman's Blues", a song already recorded by Ida Cox accompanied by its composer Lovie Austin on piano. Bessie's restraint, perfect timing and general laid back approach on this tune made it into a highlight of her recorded output in 1923.

Bessie's final session in 1923 took place on December 4. She was accompanied by reedman Don Redman and Fletcher Henderson on this date. Redman, an early associate of Henderson, pioneered the swing style in his arrangements for the Fletcher Henderson band, McKinney's Cotton Pickers and his own band during the 1920s and early 1930s. He is heard on clarinet on "Chicago Bound Blues".

Frank Walker renewed Bessie's recording contract for another year at the beginning of 1924. After her extremely successful first year with Columbia, Walker now raised Bessie's recording fee to a flat fee of two hundred dollars per useable side with no royalties payable. During the month of April 1924 Bessie and Jack, who had given up his job as a night watchman and now toured with Bessie pretending to be her tour manager, stopped touring and stayed at Jack's mother's house in Harlem. Bessie recorded eight sides during that month including "Moonshine Blues" written by Ma Rainey, but rather autobiographical in Bessie's case, as she used to love a drop of the homemade liquor. On this side Bessie was accompanied by her regular pianist on the road at the time, Irving Johns.

During her stay in New York, Bessie also rehearsed for her upcoming new tour, which included an important solo engagement at the Avenue on Monday night to a capacity audience. So much has been said of Bessie that Chicagoans were looking for something far above the average in her line, and that's just what the famous artist handed them. Her routine of songs are now and well selected and she put each and every one of them over with her well known "Band". In fact, Bessie tied up her own show and it is a safe prediction that she has earned a standing welcome with the "Blues" fans. She is aided at the piano by Irving Johns and a bit of speedy dancing between the changing of several gorgeous gowns is done by Ruby Walker*. Ruby Walker was Bessie Smith's niece by marriage and would often accompany Bessie on her tours. After the Chicago dates, Bessie played Indianapolis but she failed to make her next booking at the Lyric Theatre in New Orleans. Word was put out that Bessie was called back to New York but in fact a year of almost constant touring had caught up with her and she was exhausted. She was now the highest paid black performer of her era, commanding fees of up to two thousand dollars a week.
In late July and early August Bessie recorded six new sides with Fletcher Henderson. Four of these sides also featured trombonist Charlie Green, a member of Fletcher Henderson's new band, who was one of the first trombonists to explore the more expressive resources of his instrument. Green's presence obviously inspired Bessie with his occasional solo and wonderful asides on tunes like "Work House Blues", "House Rent Blues", and "Rainy Weather Blues", which Bessie injects with a new vitality.

During the fall of 1924, Bessie was touring again, having signed for a 20-week tour with TOBA that allowed her short breaks at her Philadelphia home and time off for recording sessions. On September 26, 1924, while working an engagement at Harlem's Lafayette Theatre, Bessie recorded two excellent sides "Weeping Willow Blues" and "The Bye Bye Blues". She was accompanied on these sides by Fletcher Henderson, Charlie Green and cornettist Joe Smith, another member of Henderson's band, who was in terms of purely sonoric identification the closest to Bessie out of the many horn players who accompanied her. Smith's cornet had that lovely, open, rich quality of Bessie at her most relaxed self. Smith's cornet adds a tinge of humour to the sad tale of abandonment by an ungrateful lover on "Weeping Willow Blues".

Pianist Fred Longshaw now became Bessie's new musical director. Longshaw was undoubtedly Bessie's best accompanist up until now, a pianist who knew Bessie's way with a song perfectly. Longshaw had that rare ability of the true accompanist to stay out of the way of the singer but to fill in with a linking phrase or an appropriate response when required.

It was about this time that the first cracks began to appear in Bessie and Jack Gee's relationship. Gee was no longer around on each tour as he now took regular leaves to pursue his newly found interest in the sport of hunting. Ruby Walker stated, "We never did find out what Jack was supposed to be hunting, but I don't think it had four legs". Jack's absence gave Bessie the opportunity to live it up, with plenty of moonshine and an affair with Fred Longshaw.

After successful performances in Birmingham, Kansas City, Chicago and Washington, Bessie returned to New York to record a number of sides during December 1924. "Sinful Blues" was the best side of these recordings, the tale of a woman given to murderous, suicidal thoughts by a philandering husband. Bessie turns in a strong performance on this track, expertly backed by Fred Longshaw. "Dying Gambler's Blues", recorded two days later, has the added presence of Charlie Green's trombone, whose moans and raspy tone inspire Bessie no end.

On January 14, 1925, Bessie recorded her first five sides with cornettist Louis Armstrong, now a celebrated member of the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra. Even allowing for Bessie's personal preference of Joe Smith above Louis Armstrong, it seems inconceivable that Bessie would even think of putting Armstrong's playing down, as has been reported. If there has been any truth in these reports, it might be explained by the fact that Louis' positively brilliant contributions to this date might have upstaged Bessie's own extraordinary vocal statements. "St. Louis Blues" is the masterpiece of these five sides. Bessie gives W.C. Handy's popular warhorse the definitive vocal treatment on record, while Louis peerless support seems very respectful of Bessie. "Reckless Blues", Bessie's own composition, is an intensely personal statement, perhaps slightly marred by Armstrong's "wa-wa" effects while using a harmon mute. Armstrong's superb use of dynamics and shading contributes strongly to the success of Perry Bradford's "Sobbin' Hearted Blues", inspiring Bessie to make even the hardest to convince that her man has most definitely done her wrong. "Cold In Hand Blues" is another opulent performance by Bessie from which even Louis' "wa-wa" introduction cannot distract.

Lafayette Theatre, Harlem, N.Y.C.
"You've Been A Good Ole Wagon" was the fifth side recorded during that memorable January 14, 1925 session. In typical fashion, Bessie strips this vaudeville standard of its intended folksy "back home" humour and turns it into a serious poignant blues. It takes Louis Armstrong some time to realize what Bessie's intentions with the song are. After what sound like a few humorous asides, Louis withdraws somewhat embarrassed about never finding Bessie's groove.

After this session Bessie went into rehearsal for two weeks to prepare for another theatre tour. This time it was a very special tour as Bessie was to play one week at Chattanooga's Liberty Theatre, making her first appearance in her hometown since she left it in 1912 with the Moses Stokes group.

The Chattanooga shows were a great success, enabling Bessie to meet old friends, fans and acquaintances. The party feel of Bessie's homecoming was disturbed when Bessie was stabbed in her side, returning from a party on the outskirts of town. The Chicago Defender reported the incident as follows, "Chattanooga, Tenn - Bessie Smith, popular Columbia record artist, was stabbed by a man said to be Buck Hodge, in what is believed to be an attempt at robbery. Miss Smith was brought to Chattanooga from Chicago to sing at the Liberty Theatre. The robbery was brought on by her display of costly diamonds and gems. Nothing serious resulted, although she was rushed to Erlanger hospital for treatment". Ruby Walker recalled that Bessie was back on stage for the next day's matinee.

Bessie's next recording session marked her first electric recording. The new recording technique was still in its infancy and the Columbia engineers feared that the large Columbia studio was unsuitable for the carbon microphone's limited range. In order to alter the studio's acoustics, the engineers now suspended a conical tent from the room's ceiling and had the artists perform under it. Bessie, the experienced tent show trouper must have been in her element to be back under canvas. Bessie's backing on the May 5 and May 6, 1925 session was the most ambitious yet and consisted of a septet of prominent members from the Fletcher Henderson band: cornettist Joe Smith, trombonist Charlie Green,clarinettist Buster Bailey, tenor saxophonist Coleman Hawkins, pianist Fletcher Henderson, banjoist Charlie Dixon and tuba player Bob Escudero. Bessie registers clearly and boisterously on 'Cake Walkin' Babies (from home)', as does Joe Smith, who surfaces for a memorable cornet break before leading the ensemble into a hot finish. The state of the art equipment seems to have had a problem with Coleman Hawkins' tenor sax, he is inaudible. The following day Bessie recorded "The Yellow Dog Blues", the type of song on which Bessie is able to work in her best emphatic range. After this the session was cut short as the tent collapsed creating "The wildest scramble you ever saw", according to Frank Walker.

On May 14, 1925, Bessie recorded "Soft Pedal Blues" backed by Charlie Green and Fred Longshaw. Bessie composed this marvellous song about a woman who runs a buffet flat, establishments where any kind of adult fun could be had or observed. Louis Armstrong, Charlie Green and Fred Longshaw provided the accompaniment on Bessie's sessions of May 26...
and 27, 1925. Louis Armstrong's introduction sets the scene for Bessie's definitive reading of the W.C. Handy classic "Careless Love Blues". In "Nashville Woman's Blues", Bessie's expansive phrasing and rich tone seem to be beyond rhythmic or metric confinement. Her floating vocal sounds improvised, expertly backed by Armstrong and Green's sensitively placed counterlines and responses and Fred Longshaw's strong harmonic backing. "J.C. Holmes Blues" is one of Bessie's finest recordings. The song's beautiful melody is set in the key of F, which in turn makes her reach for a high D in the seventh bar of each of its eight bar stanzas. Bessie's arching phrase is beautiful and exciting as she successfully handles this. Armstrong and Green, both muted this time, weave a dense, polyphonic background in an advanced New Orleans style, while Longshaw provides rhythm and harmony. Armstrong and Smith's rapport on "I Ain't Goin' Play Second Fiddle" heightens the impact of the unenclosed warning in the song's basic message.

During the summer of 1925, Bessie toured with her own "Bessie Smith's Harlem Frolics" show. After leaving New York for Atlanta, a big surprise awaited her there. Brother Clarence presented Bessie with her own railroad car, custom built by the Southern Iron and Equipment Company. This was of course a massive improvement in living conditions for Bessie and her troupe, who now could live on the train while on tour.

During a break from the Harlem Frolics show, Bessie recorded a spirited version of "I Ain't Got Nobody" on August 19, 1925, backed by a trio of reedmen Bob Fuller, pianist Isadore Meyers and banjoist Elmer Snowden. Fred Longshaw composed "I've Been Mistreated And I Don't Like It" for Bessie, who duly recorded the tune on November 18, 1925, backed by her favourite cornettist Joe Smith, Charlie Green and Fletcher Henderson.

"Red Mountain Blues" and "Golden Rule Blues" were recorded on November 20, 1935. On this occasion she was backed by the clarinet of Don Redman and pianist Fletcher Henderson. These two sides represent Bessie's triumph over adversity, as she successfully overcomes Redman's uncharacteristic corny clarinet.

Fred Longshaw expertly guides Bessie through her own "Lonesome Desert Blues". This side also marked the recording debut of Shelton Hemphill, whose trumpet could later be heard in the bands of Benny Carter, Chick Webb, Mills Blue Rhythm Band, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. A reunion of sorts took place on March 5, 1926, when Bessie recorded four sides...
accompanied by Clarence Williams, with whom Bessie had not worked since their contract problems in 1923. Bessie apparently asked Frank Walker not to put Williams’ name on the label, "because Jack said he’d kill Clarence if he ever caught him near Bessie again". Williams was not credited as the pianist on the label but had his name under three of the four songs recorded during this session, including Fats Waller’s "Squeeze Me", the highlight of the session, including Fats Waller’s "Squeeze Me", the highlight of the session, which Bessie reshapes in such manner that the tune fits her like a glove.

The great session from March 18, 1926 found Bessie in the company of clarinetist Buster Bailey, a player of considerable technique and a mainstay of the Fletcher Henderson band, and Fletcher Henderson. Both men contribute beautifully integrated accompaniments on "Jazzbo Brown From Memphis Town" and "The Gin House Blues". "Jazzbo Brown From Memphis Town" is a joyously swinging romp about a legendary Memphis clarinet player which enabled Bessie to inject the kind of hokum she included in her live-shows. "The Gin House Blues" is a poignant-to-the-point-of-pain blues, alluding to Bessie’s own addiction to gin. Bessie infuses each phrase with a raspy, pain wracked, pleading quality repeated throughout all five choruses of this blues, yet she is so perfectly controlled that one never tires of it.

On May 4, 1926, Bessie recorded four sides with Joe Smith and Fletcher Henderson. Smith gets plenty of space to shine on these superb sides, especially on "Lost Your Head Blues" on which his tone, speed of vibrato and carefully controlled pitch range, provide a perfect matching continuity to Bessie’s voice.

Publicity photo of Bessie in 1923, N.Y.C.
Bessie took leave of absence from her September/October tent show schedule with her "Harlem Frolics" to record in New York on October 25 and 26, 1926. On October 25, Fletcher Henderson accompanied Bessie on her own "Hard Time Blues" and "Honey Man Blues", credited to George Brooks, a pseudonym for Fletcher Henderson. The next day Henderson brought his band members Joe Smith and Buster Bailey to provide accompaniment to Bessie's "Young Woman's Blues" and Henderson's "One And Two Blues". Bessie's "Young Woman's Blues", a semi-autobiographical beautiful song, that she wrote herself, is regarded by many fans as one of her most moving performances. Aided by Joe Smith, who displays a huge almost trombone-sized tone on this side, Bessie delivers her message, "I ain't no high yaller, I'm a deep killer brown".

As Bessie rejoined her show in Ozark, Alabama, after this New York recording session, she was told by an indiscreet chorus girl that Jack had been unfaithful in her absence. Jack, who was on the train, now became the focus of Bessie's fury. Bessie pulled a gun on her wayward husband, who jumped off the train and disappeared as fast as he could. With Jack now absent from the troupe Bessie took full advantages of the situation, including having an affair with a young chorus girl.

Bessie returned to the recording studio on February 17, 1927. On this date she was accompanied by James P. Johnson. The greatest of the Harlem stride pianists, Johnson's vigorous grace is apparent in his accompaniment of two of Bessie's own compositions, "Preachin' The Blues" and "Backwater Blues".

While Bessie was in New York, headlining "Bessie Smith and her Yellow Girl Revue at the Lincoln theatre, she recorded on March 2 and 3, 1927. Backed by Joe Smith, trombonist Jimmy Harrison, Buster Bailey, Coleman Hawkins, Fletcher Henderson and Charlie Dixon, Bessie recorded four Tin Pan Alley songs. Bessie virtually recomposes the famous standard "After You've Gone", making it very much her own and very much a blues. Bessie does pretty well on "Alexander's Ragtime Band" and "There'll Be A Hot Time In The Old Town Tonight", a song that dates back to the Spanish-American war, that Bessie often played to lure small-town audiences into her tent. Yet her renditions of these old time hits do not reach the standard of her more personalized classic blues. "Muddy Water (A Mississippi Moan)" was a current hit at the time of this session; Bing Crosby with Paul Whiteman, Jack Pettis and Gene Austin recorded it but Bessie takes the song beyond its basic banality.

Bessie returned to the studio the following day, this time bringing Joe Smith, Charlie Green and Fletcher Henderson with her. "Trombone Cholly", written by Fletcher Henderson under his non-de-plume George Brooks, is a piece of jazz comedy a la "Jazzbo Brown From Memphis Town", on which two of Bessie's most sympathetic accompanists shine. Charlie Green is the object of Bessie's admiration here, while Joe Smith is featured here to great advantage as well. Fletcher Henderson wrote "Send Me To The 'lectric Chair", which suits Bessie as the type of song that hovers halfway between the traditional blues form and the popular song.
The only let down, very uncharacteristic for Bessie, is the repetition of the word "Judge", which she sings the same way over a dozen times.

Before Bessie set off on another "Harlem Frolics" tent tour, she recorded two sides accompanied by James P. Johnson on April 1, 1927. Johnson composed both "Sweet Mistreater" and "Lock And Key". Johnson displays a touch of formality in his accompaniment on these tunes but he and Bessie work very well together on "Lock And Key", where Bessie reshapes the lyrics with some patter, while Johnson embellishes her every word.

The "Harlem Frolics" tour finished in mid-September 1927 after a series of one and two-nighters in Georgia and Alabama. The long tour had been successful but had also worn Bessie out. She was tired and decided not to participate in the annual TOBA autumn tour.

On September 27, 1927, Bessie recorded two sides backed by pianist Porter Grainger and guitarist Lincoln Conaway. Porter Grainger was another great accompanist, whose work, like that of Fred Longshaw, is easily overlooked because they were never spectacular, nor were they meant to be. These were well-disciplined, solid musicians, performing with ease in what was a difficult role. "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" was the highlight of this session, on which Bessie demonstrates how much of the jazz improviser's art there is in her approach, as she defines the tempo of the song while playing hopscotch with the beat.

On October 17, 1927, Bessie opened in the musical comedy 'Mississippi Days' at Harlem's Lafayette Theatre. Members of the show remarked that Bessie's frequent trips to the speakeasy around the corner from the Lafayette Theatre left her in such a state that she had to be propped up on the stage. As Bessie's show at the Lafayette Theatre ended, she recorded two beautiful sides on October 27, 1927. Her accompaniment on this date consisted of cornettist Tommy Ladnier, who had taken Louis Armstrong's seat as principal trumpet soloist in Fletcher Henderson's band, pianist Fletcher Henderson and tuba player June Cole, another member of the Fletcher Henderson band at the time. Ladnier's muted repartees on "Dyin' By The Hour" and "Foolish Man Blues" suit the mood splendidly, while Bessie's resonant voice creates the melody.

After this session Bessie returned to Philadelphia to open her new "Harlem Frolics" at Gibson's Standard Theatre, before leaving for Chicago to launch a short theatre tour. Bessie opened her recording schedule for 1928 with a session on February 9, on which she was backed by cornettist Demus Dean, trombonist Charlie Green and pianist Fred Longshaw. Bessie is at her most artistically varied and persuasive on her own composition "Thinking Blues", where the creation of melody is once more largely up to her.

Porter Grainger and two dance band reedmen, Abraham Wheat and Bob...
Fuller, accompanied Bessie on her March 19, 1928 session, which produced the wonderful "Spider Man Blues". The next day Bessie recorded her classic two-parter "Empty Bed Blues" accompanied by Charlie Green and Porter Grainger. "Big" Green's trombone dialogue with Bessie on "Empty Bed Blues" runs the gamut from rough humour to salacious sexual imagery, as his growly, grinding trombone underscores Bessie's various sexual metaphors. "Empty bed blues" became a big hit for Bessie and a favourite crowd pleaser in her live performances. "Put It Right There (Or Keep It Out There)" was also recorded at this session and continued Bessie and Big Green's collaboration at a high and humorous level. Written by Porter Grainer for Bessie's show at the Lafayette Theatre 'Put It Right There' finds Bessie displaying the timing of the master comedian.

By 1928 the blues craze that had helped propel Bessie Smith into a superstar was over. Yet Bessie Smith seemed immune to this decline, she was still selling bucket loads of records and filled theatres and tents up and down the country. Bessie found herself now being feted by New York's chattering class. This led to an incident at one of Carl Van Vechten's salons to which Bessie was invited in April 1928. Bessie sang several songs during the affair and drank a good amount of liquor between them. Ruby Walker accompanied Bessie to the party along with Porter Grainger and told author and Bessie Smith expert Chris Albertson, "Bessie was good and drunk when she finished her last song so Porter came over to me and said 'Let's get her out of here quick, before she shows her ass'. We got her coat on her and got her to the front door when all of a sudden this woman (Mrs Van Vechten) comes out of nowhere. "Miss Smith, you're not leaving without kissing me goodbye", she said and she threw her arms around Bessie, it was a mess. Bessie screamed "Get the fuck away from me!" and she pushed her arms out, throwing that poor woman to the floor. 'Then she said, 'I ain't never heard of such shit!' and poor Porter, he would have done anything to be with that crowd, but now Bessie had done shown her ass to all them people. I felt so sorry for him'.

A rare photo thought to be taken in Atlanta City in the late 1920s, Bessie Smith is seated on the floor in the centre.
On August 24, 1928, Bessie recorded a session, backed by novelty reedmen Bob Fuller and Ernest Elliott with Porter Grainger on piano. With the exception of Porter Grainger, this was a poor backing group, yet both "Devil's Gonna Git You" and "Poor Man's Blues" are prime examples of Bessie rising above mediocrity as she delivers a spirited performance on the former song and a deeply moving one on the latter.

The next day Bessie recorded two more sides, this time backed by trombonist Joe Williams, a talented player with a style very close to Charlie Green, and Porter Grainger. They brilliantly accompany Bessie on her own song, the heartfelt 'Please Help Me Get Him Out Of My Mind' and 'Me And My Gin', a song often described as autobiographical and widely considered as one of Bessie's finest sides. Joe William's touch of tension and nastiness in his tone provides the perfect counter foil to Bessie on this side.

Around this time Bessie received an attractive offer from the TOBA circuit to produce a new show. As a gesture to mend their relationship Bessie gave husband Jack three thousand dollars to produce her new show "Steamboat Days". The show set off successfully with performances in Washington, D.C., Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and Harlem's Lincoln Theatre. In the meantime, Jack Gee had been rehearsing a second show, starring Gertrude Saunders, a light-complexioned beauty with whom Jack was having an affair. Jack was financing the show with half of the $3,000 dollars Bessie had given him to produce "Steamboat Days". Bessie was apparently unaware of all of this until she read a story in the Amsterdam News about how well Jack Gee was doing with Gertrude Saunders' show. Bessie was appearing at the Roosevelt Theatre in Cincinnati when she found out, while the Gertrude Saunders show was playing in Columbus, 90 miles from Cincinnati. A furious Bessie took a taxi to Columbus to confront Jack. Eventually Jack and Bessie made up. Jack left the Gertrude Saunders show and joined Bessie during her next booking at the Wallace Theatre in Indianapolis, but this time it was too late, Bessie and Jack fought constantly.

Bessie drank so heavily that Ruby had to take her place on a number of occasions. By April 1929 Bessie walked out of "Steamboat Days" and out of Jack Gee's life.

Bessie now opened in a new, hastily assembled "Harlem Frolics" show at the Lincoln Theatre in Harlem on April 22, 1929. During the run of this show, Bessie was approached by composer Maceo Pinkard to star in a Broadway show called "Pansy". Rehearsal time for the show was short, but Bessie's part was not too taxing as she only had to

Bessie Smith billed as the Greatest and Highest salaried race star in the world.
sing two songs in the final act.

While rehearsing for her Broadway debut, Bessie recorded a session on May 8, 1929, backed by Clarence Williams and the celebrated white guitarist Eddie Lang. "I'm Wild About That Thing", written by Spencer Williams, and Andy Razaf's "Kitchen Man" were two of the raunchiest songs Bessie had recorded thus far.

One week later Bessie was back in the studio, this time backed by cornettist Ed Allen, a veteran of the Mississippi riverboat bands and the bands of Earl Hines and Joe Jordan. Alto saxophonist Garvin Bushell had worked with Mamie Smith's Jazz Hounds, Ethel Waters and the band of Sam Wooding. Tenor saxophonist Greeley Walton had worked with Elmer Snowden and was working with Benny Carter at the time of this recording. Clarence Williams was on piano, supported by tuba player Cyrus St. Clair. Bessie was in fantastic form on this May 15, 1929 date, turning in definitive versions of "I've Got What It Takes (But It Breaks My Heart To Give It Away) and "Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out".

Bessie's first run on Broadway was short. "Pansy" received some of the worst reviews a Broadway show ever reaped, although all critics were unanimous in their praise of Bessie Smith. As one door closed, another one opened when Bessie was invited to play the lead in Dudley Murphy's film short based on the song "St. Louis Blues". It would turn out to be the only film Bessie ever made, singing "St. Louis Blues" backed by old friends like Joe Smith, Charlie Green, James P. Johnson plus strings and the large Hall - Johnson Choir.

James P. Johnson accompanied Bessie on two fine sides on the August 20, 1929 session, "He's Got Me Goin" and "It Makes My Love Come Down". "He's Got Me Goin" is especially rewarding as Bessie demonstrates her ability to control the colouring of her rich, full voice backed by Johnson's happily romping piano.

While Wall Street crashed, Bessie was enjoying a successful run with her new show "Late Hour Dancers" at The Lafayette and Lincoln Theatre in Harlem.

During October 1929 Bessie resumed her collaboration in the recording studio with James P. Johnson. Bessie wrote "Dirty No-Gooders Blues", a witty song, which evokes some great growls from Bessie. "Blue Spirit Blues" was one of the highlights of Bessie's October 11, 1929 session. The song evokes visions of hell and fire and brimstone sung in an appropriately hard and uncompromising voice. "You Don't Understand" and "Don't Cry Baby" have a different feel altogether, "You Don't Understand" with its feel of a popular song, becomes a masterful, natural amalgam of delicate shadings in Bessie's able hands.

Bessie starred in the musical comedy
“The Jazz Regiment” at Harlem’s Lafayette Theatre before touring theatres in the South in the ‘Midnight Steppers’ revue. Bessie toured with the renowned guitarist and blues singer Lonnie Johnson, with whom she had an affair during this tour.

Even Bessie Smith was not immune from the ravages of the Depression. Many theatres now stopped presenting stage shows and went for the cheaper option of presenting talking movies and Bessie began to experience part empty houses during her tours. She had always financially supported her sisters Viola, Lulu and Tinnie, but by 1930 she was forced to cut her level of support. Her railroad car was another victim of the new economic climate as it had to be sold.

On April 12, 1930, Bessie recorded two sides accompanied by Charlie Green and Clarence Williams. Bessie certainly transformed “Baby Have Pity On Me”, a rather mediocre type of pop song written by Billy Moll and Clarence Williams, on this date.

“On Revival Day” looks like an attempt to broaden Bessie’s repertoire now that the classic blues boom was over. On June 9, 1930, Bessie recorded two gospel type songs, backed by James P. Johnson and The Bessemer Singers vocal group. “On Revival Day” and “Moan You Moaner” would remain the only two recorded excursions of Bessie into a religious genre.

While touring her new show, put together by Frank Walker and brother Clarence, Bessie ran into her old friend Richard Morgan from Birmingham, who had become a successful bootlegger on Chicago’s South Side. Morgan, a nephew of Lionel Hampton, was a tall and handsome business man and a great fan and friend of Bessie for many years. Bessie and Richard now turned that friendship into a full-blown relationship that worked from the word go.

On July 22, 1930, Bessie recorded “Hustlin’ Dan” and “Black Mountain Blues” backed by cornettist Ed Allen and pianist Steve Stevens. Unfortunately these sides reveal the heavy wear and tear Bessie’s excessive drinking had brought on her voice.

Back in Philadelphia, Bessie and Richard set up a bootlegging business, selling the stuff at their house, while Bessie continued to perform. During 1931, Bessie worked mainly Philadelphia theatres in shows like “Gossiping Liza” and “Hot Stuff”. With the record industry in the doldrums, Bessie recorded her last session for Columbia on November 20, 1931, accompanied by Clarence Williams, the same pianist who had accompanied her on her debut date for Columbia eight years before. The wear and tear in Bessie’s voice is very obvious on “Need A Little Sugar In My Bowl” and “Safety Mama”, but her superb timing and phrasing are gloriously intact. Frank Walker did not require the four remaining sides Bessie’s contract with Columbia called for. He paid her the five hundred dollars for the four sides but did not bother to record them.

Bessie continued to work in 1932 and 33 with bookings in the theatres in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Chicago and New York. On November 24, 1933, Bessie recorded four sides for the Okeh label. John Hammond, who organised this session had provided Bessie with an all-star backing band that included swing stars like trumpeter Frankie Newton,
trombonist Jack Teagarden, tenor saxophonist Chu Berry, pianist Buck Washington, guitarist Bobby Jackson and bassist Billy Taylor. Bessie opens with "Do Your Duty" sung with tremendous drive, especially in the two stop-time choruses. Clarinettist Benny Goodman joins the ensemble on "Gimme A Pigfoot", although his role is restricted to the ensemble that roars behind a boisterous Bessie on this side, that over time was to become one of her best known recordings. "Take Me For A Buggy Ride" also reflected the joyful spirit of this session, which ended on a somewhat more subdued note with "I'm Down In The Dumps".

The November 24, 1933 recording date was to be Bessie's final one. During 1934 Bessie successfully toured the South in the "Hot in Harlem" revue. In 1935, Bessie appeared at Harlem's Apollo theatre and appeared at the Cotton Club in the "Blackbirds" revue. The next year she replaced Billie Holiday for a two-month engagement at "Connie's Inn", the popular Harlem nightspot which had recently relocated to Times Square in mid-town Manhattan. By this time Bessie had incorporated standards like "Stardust" and "Pennies From Heaven" into her act and dressed in tight fitting evening gowns, discarding the feather boas and ambitious headgear.

Lionel Hampton and Benny Goodman were talking about recording with Bessie, and with the re-awakening of interest in the earlier forms of American Music and plans for another movie, this could have been the time for Bessie's career to revive. It was not to be. On September 26, 1937 Bessie was fatally injured while being driven by Richard Morgan to an engagement in Mississippi. One of the most emotionally compelling voices in the wide history of song was silenced that September night.

JOOP VISSE
Reference: Chris Albertson "Bessie", Stein And Day 1972

A late photo of Bessie in more sombre mood.
Discography

Disc One: Down Hearted Blues

Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Clarence Williams, p
New York, April 11, 1923

80863-5  DOWN HEARTED BLUES
80864-3  GULF COAST BLUES

Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by her Down Home Trio: probably Ernest Elliott cl; Clarence Williams, p; Buddy Christian, bjo
New York, April 11, 1923

80950-2  BEALE STREET MAMA
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Clarence Williams, p
New York, April 11, 1923

80952-3  BABY WON’T YOU PLEASE COME HOME
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Clarence Williams, p
New York, April 26, 1923

80862-10  ‘TAIN’T NOBODY’S BIZNESS IF I DO
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Fletcher Henderson, p
New York, June 14, 1923

81075-3  BLEEDING HEARTED BLUES
81078-3  LADY LUCK BLUES
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Fletcher Henderson, p
New York, June 15, 1923

81080-3  MIDNIGHT BLUES
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by George Baquet or Ernest Elliott, cl; possibly Jimmy Jones, p
New York, October 15, 1923

81244-7  WHOA, TILLIE, TAKE YOUR TIME
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Fletcher Henderson, p
New York, October 16, 1923

81283-3  ANY WOMAN’S BLUES
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Don Redman, cl; Fletcher Henderson, p
December 4, 1923

81391-3  CHICAGO BOUND BLUES
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Irving Johns, p
New York, April 9th, 1924

81676-1  MOONSHINE BLUES
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Charlie Green, tb; Fletcher Henderson, p
New York, July 23, 1924

81883-2  WORK HOUSE BLUES
81884-4  HOUSE RENT BLUES
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Charlie Green, tb; Fletcher Henderson, p
New York, August 8, 1924

81907-1  RAINY WEATHER BLUES
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Joe Smith, cnt; Charlie Green, tb; Fletcher Henderson, p
New York, September 26, 1924

W 140062-2  WEEPING WILLOW BLUES
W 140063-3  THE BYE BYE BLUES

Bessie Smith, voc, kazoo, acc. by Fred Longshaw, p
New York, December 11, 1924

W 140162-5  SINFUL BLUES
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Charlie Green, tb; Fred Longshaw, p
New York, December 13, 1924

W 140176-2  DYING GAMBLER’S BLUES
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Louis Armstrong, cnt; Fred Longshaw, reed organ, p.
New York, January 14, 1925

W 140241-1  THE ST. LOUIS BLUES
W 140242-1  RECKLESS BLUES
W 1402492  SOBBIN’ HEARTED BLUES
W 140250-2  COLD IN HAND BLUES

Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Louis Armstrong, cnt; Fred Longshaw, p.
New York, January 14, 1925

W 140251-1  YOU’VE BEEN A GOOD OLE WAGON
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Fletcher Henderson’s Hot Six: Joe Smith, cnt; Charlie Green, tb; Buster Bailey, cl; Coleman...
W 140585-2 CAKE WALKIN' BABIES
(From home)
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Fred Longshaw, p
New York, June 23, 1925

W 140717-3 HE'S GONE BLUES
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by her band: Bob Fuller, cl, as; Isadore Myers, p; Elmer Snowden, bjo.
New York, August 19, 1925

W 140586-1 THE YELLOW DOG BLUES
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Charlie Green, tb;
Fred Longshaw, p
New York, May 14, 1925

W 140601-1 SOFT PEDAL BLUES
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Louis Armstrong, cnt; Charlie Green, tb; Fred Longshaw, p
New York, May 26, 1925

W 140626-1 CARELESS LOVE BLUES
W 140625-2 NASHVILLE WOMAN'S BLUES
Same personnel as above
New York, May 27, 1925

W 140629-2 J.C. HOLMES BLUES
W 140630-1 I AIN'T GOIN' TO PLAY SECOND FIDDLE
Same personnel and date as above, but add Buster Bailey, cl

141767-2 THEM 'HAS BEEN' BLUES
141768-3 SQUEEZE ME
141769-2 WHAT'S THE MATTER NOW?
141770-2 I WANT EVERY BIT OF IT
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Buster Bailey, cl;
Fletcher Henderson, p
New York, March 18, 1926

141819-2 JAZZBO BROWN FROM MEMPHIS TOWN
141820-3 THE GIN HOUSE BLUES
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Joe Smith, cnt;
Fletcher Henderson, p
New York, May 4, 1926

142146-3 MONEY BLUES
142147-2 BABY DOLL
142148-3 HARD DRIVING PAPA
142149-1 LOST YOUR HEAD BLUES
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Fletcher Henderson, p
New York, October 25, 1926

142874-2 HARD TIME BLUES
142875-3 HONEY MAN BLUES
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Her Blue Boys: Joe Smith, cnt; Buster Bailey, cl; Fletcher Henderson, p
New York, October 26, 1926

Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by James P. Johnson, p
New York, February 17, 1927

143490-2 PREACHIN' THE BLUES
143491-1 BACKWATER BLUES
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Her Band: Joe Smith, cnt; Jimmy Harrison, tb; Buster Bailey, cl; Fletcher Henderson, p; Charlie Dixon, bjo.
New York, March 2, 1927

143567-2 AFTER YOU'VE GONE
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Her Band: Joe Smith, cnt; Jimmy Harrison, tb; Coleman Hawkins, ts; Fletcher Henderson, p; Charlie Dixon, bjo.
New York, March 2, 1927

143568-1 ALEXANDER'S RAGTIME BAND
Same personnel and date as above, but add Buster Bailey, cl
144918-1 DYIN' BY THE HOUR
FOOLISH MAN BLUES
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Demus Dean, cnt; Charlie Green, tb; Fred Longshaw, p.
New York, February 9, 1928

145626-2 THINKING BLUES
I USED TO BE YOUR SWEET MAMA
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Abraham Wheat, cl, ss; Bob Fuller, cl; Porter Grainger, p.
New York, March 19, 1928

W 145783-2 SPIDER MAN BLUES
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Charlie Green, tb; Porter Grainger, p.
New York, March 20, 1928

W 145785-3 EMPTY BED BLUES, PT 1
W 145786-1 EMPTY BED BLUES, PT 2
W 145787-3 PUT IT RIGHT HERE
(OR KEEP IT OUT THERE)
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Bob Fuller, cl, as; Ernest Elliott, cl, as; ts; Porter Grainger, p.
New York, August 24, 1928

W 146887-2 YES INDEED HE DO!
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Bob Fuller, cl, as; Ernest Elliott, cl, as; ts; Porter Grainger, p.
New York, August 24, 1928

W 146888-2 DEVIL'S GONNA GIT YOU
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Joe Williams, tb; Bob Fuller, cl, as; Ernest Elliott, cl, as; ts; Porter Grainger, p.
New York, August 24, 1928

W 146895-1 POOR MAN'S BLUES
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Joe Williams, tb; Porter Grainger, p.
New York, August 25, 1928

W 146896-2 PLEASE HELP ME GET HIM OUT OF MY MIND
W 146897-3 ME AND MY GIN
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Clarence Williams, p; Eddie Lang, g.
New York, May 8, 1929

W 148485-3 I'M WILD ABOUT THAT THING
W 148487-4 KITCHEN MAN
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Ed Allen, cnt; Garvin Bushell, as; Greely Walton, ts; Clarence Williams, p; Cyrus St. Clair, tu
New York, May 15, 1929

W 148533-2 I'VE GOT WHAT IT TAKES (BUT IT BREAKS MY HEART TO GIVE IT AWAY)
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by James P. Johnson, p; The Bessemer Singers, vocal group
New York, June 9, 1930

W 148534-3 NOBODY KNOWS YOU WHEN YOU'RE DOWN AND OUT
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by James P. Johnson, p
New York, August 20, 1929

W 148902-2 HE'S GOT ME GOIN' W 148904-1 IT MAKES MY LOVE COME DOWN
Same personnel as above
New York, October 1, 1929

W 149075-1 DIRTY NO-GOODERS BLUES
Same personnel as above
New York, October 11, 1929

W 149134-3 BLUE SPIRIT BLUES
W 149136-2 YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND W 149137-2 DON'T CRY BABY
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Charlie Green, tb; Clarence Williams, p
New York, April 12, 1930

W 150459-3 BABY HAVE PITY ON ME
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by James P. Johnson, p; The Bessemer Singers, vocal group
New York, June 9, 1930
W 150574-4 ON REVIVAL DAY
(A RHYTHMIC SPIRITUAL)
Bessie Smith, voc. acc. by Ed Allen, cnt;
Steve Stevens, p
New York, July 22, 1930

W 150657-1 HUSTLIN' DAN
W 150658-7 BLACK MOUNTAIN BLUES
Bessie Smith, voc.acc. by Clarence Williams, p
New York, November 20, 1931

W 151883-1 NEED A LITTLE SUGAR
IN MY BOWL
W 151884-1 SAFETY MAMA
Bessie Smith, voc.acc. by Buck and his Band
: Frankie Newton, tp; Jack Teagarden, tb;
Benny Goodman,cl (-1), Chu Berry, ts; Buck
Washington, p, ldr; Bobby Johnson, g; Billy
Taylor, b
New York, November 24, 1933

W 152577-2 DO YOUR DUTY
W 152578-2 GIMME A PIGFOOT (-1)
W 152579-2 TAKE ME FOR A BUGGY
RIDE
W 152580-2 I'M DOWN IN THE DUMPS
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Down Hearted Blues

1. DOWN HEARTED BLUES 3:25
2. GULF COAST BLUES 3:04
3. BEALE STREET MAMA 3:25
4. BABY WON'T YOU PLEASE COME HOME 2:55
5. 'TAIN'T NOBODY'S BIZNESS IF I DO 3:26
6. BLEEDING HEARTED BLUES 3:06
7. LADY LUCK BLUES 3:07
8. MIDNIGHT BLUES 3:17
9. WHOA, TILLIE, TAKE YOUR TIME 3:10
10. ANY WOMAN'S BLUES 3:25
11. CHICAGO BOUND BLUES 3:16
12. MOONSHINE BLUES 3:17
13. WORK HOUSE BLUES 3:21
14. HOUSE RENT BLUES 3:05
15. RAINY WEATHER BLUES 3:36
16. WEEPING WILLOW BLUES 3:09
17. THE BYE BYE BLUES 3:17
18. SINFUL BLUES 3:08
19. DYING GAMBLER'S BLUES 2:57
20. THE ST. LOUIS BLUES 3:10
21. RECKLESS BLUES 3:02
22. SOBBIN' HEARTED BLUES 3:00
23. COLD IN HAND BLUES 3:11

Compiled and produced for release by Joop Visser
Digital remastering by Peter Rynston at Tall Order Mastering
Design by Raven Design
Photographs courtesy of The Frank Driggs Collection/Symil

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mcps
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Made in England
1. YOU'VE BEEN A GOOD OLE WAGON 3:28  
2. CAKE WALKIN' BABIES  
   (FROM HOME) 3:09  
3. THE YELLOW DOG BLUES 3:02  
4. SOFT PEDAL BLUES 3:18  
5. CARELESS LOVE BLUES 3:25  
6. NASHVILLE WQMAN'S BLUES 3:43  
7. J.C. HOLMES BLUES 3:03  
8. I AIN'T GOIN TO PLAY SECOND FIDDLE 3:21  
9. HE'S GONE BLUES 3:09  
10. I AIN'T GOT NOBODY 3:09  
11. I'VE BEEN MISTREATED AND I  
   DON'T LIKE IT 2:54  
12. RED MOUNTAIN BLUES 3:11  
13. GOLDEN RULE BLUES 3:04  
14. LONESOME DESERT BLUES 3:25  
15. THEM "HAS BEEN" BLUES 3:31  
16. SQUEEZE ME 2:53  
17. WHAT'S THE MATTER NOW? 2:45  
18. I WANT EVERY BIT OF IT 2:36  
19. JAZZBO BROWN  
   FROM MEMPHIS TOWN 3:19  
20. THE GIN HOUSE BLUES 3:13  
21. MONEY BLUES 3:10  
22. BABY DOLL 3:00  
23. HARD DRIVING PAPA 2:57  
24. LOST YOUR HEAD BLUES 2:54  

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Made in England
1. DEVIL'S GONNA GIT YOU 3:10
2. POOR MAN'S BLUES 3:24
3. PLEASE HELP ME GET HIM OUT OF MY MIND 2:55
4. ME AND MY GIN 2:49
5. I'M WILD ABOUT THAT THING 2:48
6. KITCHEN MAN 2:46
7. I'VE GOT WHAT IT TAKES (BUT IT BREAKS MY HEART TO GIVE IT AWAY) 3:09
8. NOBODY KNOWS YOU WHEN YOU'RE DOWN AND OUT 2:57
9. HE'S GOT ME GOIN' 3:12
10. IT MAKES MY LOVE COME DOWN 2:56
11. DIRTY NO-GOODERS BLUES 2:55
12. BLUE SPIRIT BLUES 2:55
13. YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND 3:04
14. DON'T CRY BABY 3:09
15. BABY HAVE PITY ON ME 3:19
16. ON REVIVAL DAY 2:55
17. HUSTLIN' DAN 3:30
18. BLACK MOUNTAIN BLUES 3:07
19. NEED A LITTLE SUGAR IN MY BOWL 2:47
20. SAFETY MAMA 3:24
21. DO YOUR DUTY 3:23
22. GIMME A PIGFOOT 3:28
23. TAKE ME FOR A BUGGY RIDE 2:36
24. I'M DOWN IN THE DUMPS 3:10
BESSIE SMITH
CHATTANOOGA GAL

Young Woman Blues

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