

# Bessie Smith: A Spark for Langston Hughes, A Heroine for Cora

By Dan Sanders

"Let the blare of Negro jazz and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing the blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand."

— Langston Hughes

The fictional title character in "Cora Unashamed" is forty, which places her year of birth at 1894. That same year, it is believed that Bessie Smith was born. No one knows for sure, however. In the America of a century ago, the birthdays of most African Americans were of no more consequence than those of plow horses, and Bessie Smith had no idea of her precise age. In any case, had Cora Jenkins lived outside Hughes' prose, Smith would have been a mythic, near-holy figure to her: a rich, powerful African American woman, perhaps the first one Cora had ever heard of.

Bessie Smith might have had as much to do with Langston Hughes becoming a writer as anyone. The blues, which he first heard at the age of nine in Kansas City, were the prime inspiration for his earliest poetry. By the time Hughes was writing in earnest, the blues were absolutely ruled by Bessie Smith. Their paths crossed often.

## A Rough Start

For an African American at the turn of the century like Hughes, Smith or the fictitious Cora, life held virtually no hope of any prosperity whatsoever. "Civil rights" was a concept three generations away; there was almost no social integration. The only work available was the most grueling manual labor, or the domestic drudgery to which Cora has a life sentence. In either case, the casualty rate for blacks was appalling. By the time Bessie Smith was eight or nine, both of her parents and her brother had died. The girl was raised in Chattanooga, Tennessee, by two sisters who were barely in their teens.

To stay alive, the little girl sang religious songs on the streets, dodging horseless carriages and snarling merchants. If people liked Bessie's singing they might throw a penny or two; if not, she went hungry that day. Such stakes tend to give a performer a very strong sense of just what an audience likes.

The songs the ragged girl sang were mainly spirituals -- ancient songs originally forged in the heat and death of slaveowner's fields. By the time Bessie was a teenager, the musical structure of spirituals had foaled blues in the South, and it had recently become a popular music form there. Hughes wrote about it frequently. Blues was music of, by and for blacks like Cora -- articulating their everyday agonies and rare triumphs. It would be the wellspring of jazz, music theater, rock and rap. And it was the first spark for Langston Hughes.

"100 Performers and Musicians WANTED. Both ladies and gentlemen for my 2 shows under canvas. A Rabbit's Foot Comedy & Funny Folks Comedy. 40 weeks engagement for the right parties..."

Musical Trade Paper  
Advertisement, 1912

For a few African Americans there was a single, slender hope: the tent shows of the era. Most theaters barred minorities, so a few industrious black promoters assembled vaudeville-like companies and barnstormed the South. If one had performing talent -- singing, dancing, virtuosity with a musical instrument, perhaps -- there was a living wage and travel to be found in this line of work, something all but

impossible to people such as Cora. For an African American woman her age, tent shows would have been an integral part of her rare leisure time, a welcomed respite from her toil with the Studevants.

## **In the Spotlight**

Bessie's talent was obvious, but she lost her first chorus job when her looks were judged "too black" by the show's producer. Fortunately, genius knows genius: Bessie had by this time caught the ear of Gertrude "Ma" Rainey. Ma was known as "The Mother of the Blues," and it was that rarest of showbiz titles – one that was wholly unexaggerated. Rainey (1886-1939) almost singlehandedly smoothed the rough edges of the male-dominated blues idiom and gave it both showmanship and commercial viability. Before long, Bessie was part of Rainey's show. Blues was the rap of its day – boisterous, crude and great fun. Even in a place like Melton, Cora would have known about it.

WWI was over and hordes of men limped home from Europe. Many of them were African American, but there was little waiting for them but pandemic bigotry. Race rioting was everywhere. The hottest issue of the era was Prohibition, a Constitutional amendment banning alcoholic beverages. "Bootleggers" supplied people like Cora's father with then-illegal liquor. Blues thrived in the underground nightclubs serving it. By the time Bessie was in her late teens, she had made a name for herself in blues circles, been married and widowed – and it was already clear she liked drinking to excess.

Bessie married again, and badly. Jack Gee was big, charming and talentless. On their first date someone shot and nearly killed him. Like any bully, he liked power. Some years earlier he had been rejected in his aspiration to be a police officer but he often posed as one. The relationship between Jack and Bessie would be a complex, tortured one. Jack tried to control Bessie but was rebuffed by her gin-laced temper; he often beat her. Many of her staple songs by this time were about problems with men, and from all accounts Bessie had plenty of inspiration for them. Just after Jack was recovered from the shooting, Bessie made her first recording, "Downhearted Blues" ("Once I was crazy about a man / He mistreated me all the time..."). The postwar economy was booming, and families like the Studevants of "Cora Unashamed" wanted gadgets and diversions like phonograph records. "Downhearted" was a huge hit, selling three quarters of a million copies, many to young whites. One can imagine a young Art Studeviant and his fiancée playing Bessie's records when his parents are away at their hardware store, and Cora playing them when no one else is home.

## **Fame and Fortune**

By 1924, Hughes had returned from Paris and settled in New York, just after the dawn of the Harlem Renaissance. His writing was beginning to draw notice. He wrote of the thrill of seeing Bessie Smith on the street, and of meeting her for the first time. As noted by Hughes scholar Arnold Rampersad in **The Life of Langston Hughes** (Oxford University Press, 1986):

"When he went to Baltimore, thumping his drum for the book, he discovered that Bessie Smith, the greatest of blues vocalists, was in town. Backstage, the . . . poet of the blues stood before the real thing – the Empress of the Blues in her volcanic prime in 1925, big-boned, black, majestic, and with overwhelming emotional needs that moved her to shattering performances on stage."

Arnold Rampersad  
Oxford University Press, 1986

Bessie was touring and recording nonstop now. Tickets to her live shows were impossible to get, and the money poured in. She was generous and soon had what today would be called a celebrity's "posse" – a pack of fair weather hangers-on who helped her get drunk and spent her money. Her siblings were given houses and allowances. To them all, Bessie was like the Golden Goose.

About this time, millions of African Americans deserted the farms, mills and oppressions of the South and

went in search of factory jobs in Detroit and Cleveland, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. Consequently, many of them were soon lonely for a taste of home. Bessie led the way in bringing blues to the great theater houses of the North, transforming it from a regional to a national music. As she did this, white audiences began to embrace the energy and passion of live blues as well.

One man who saw her perform wrote: "Bessie Smith was a fabulous deal to watch. She was a pretty large woman and she could sing the blues. She had a church deal mixed up in it. She dominated a stage. She could bring about mass hypnotism. When she was performing, you could hear a pin drop."

But her drinking, marriage and violent outbursts worsened as her fame widened. She was rich but not allowed into most hotels or restaurants because of her color. The same lifestyle that would claim so many rock stars a half-century later was taking its toll.

## **Emotional and Economic Turmoil**

In 1929 the roof fell in – both for Bessie and America. The blues craze was drying up and being supplanted by new stuff called jazz. Bessie's records were now selling under ten thousand copies each. The economy crashed into the Depression, throwing millions out of work. Women like Cora clung to their jobs, grateful for a chance at mere survival. Suddenly no one had money for concerts or records, and the theaters either closed or switched to a more economic form of entertainment – movies. The party was over.

It had never occurred to Bessie to save money; Jack took most of what she made, anyway. When the money was gone, so was he, along with all of her "friends." Her sisters resented Bessie for suddenly cutting their allowances and hence, barely spoke to her. These multiple betrayals shattered her.

About this time she recorded her most famous song, "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out." Like most of her songs, one reads its lyrics and it isn't hard to figure out what drew her to them. The record today is seen as a supreme performance overshadowing even blues, an absolute landmark that set a standard for all the jazz singers succeeding her.

Hughes praised Smith during her entire career, defending her abilities against pretenders to her throne. She explained to him on one occasion: "The trouble with white folks singing blues, is they can't get low down enough."

Reacting to these downfalls, Bessie went back to her first audience, the South, and toured small towns. But by 1931 her record company had dropped her, the public considered her a has-been, and she was on the long spiral down from fame. Her last years were mostly a lonely struggle, but she appeared at the Apollo Theater in 1936 (substituting for a new star with a substance-abuse problem, Billie Holiday) to warm success. Bessie had opened the gates to the coming jazz style some years before, and was now convinced she could make the switch to the new music. Back on her feet, she was offered a spot in a small touring show, and she set off for it in her old Packard with a friend on September 26, 1937. Near Coahoma, Mississippi, Bessie's automobile hit a parked truck, and she was killed.

Her husband, Jack Gee, swooped in and stole what was left of Bessie's money. He would get rich later off her royalties, but her grave remained unmarked for decades. Whenever someone tried to buy a headstone, Jack took the money and pocketed it for himself. Like Cora, Bessie was born a nobody and seemed to become one again in death.

But her music, of course, could not be stilled. Her records influenced countless artists, and in 1970 the record company that had once abandoned her released her entire recording catalog to wide acclaim – and two Grammy awards. America discovered her once again.

Bessie's final justice was poetic. In the summer of 1970, a young woman donated the money to provide Bessie with a headstone on her grave. The woman was the most famous female rock star in the world, a hard-living, troubled songstress whose music was completely rooted in blues; her voice sounds remarkably

like Bessie's. Her name was Janis Joplin, and heroin would kill her eight weeks later at the age of twenty-seven. The headstone she gave Bessie is inscribed:

THE GREATEST BLUES SINGER IN THE WORLD WILL NEVER STOP SINGING

### **Teacher's Notes**

Life on the road was difficult for blues performers in Bessie's era; everything was segregated, and the strain took its toll. On one occasion, Bessie learned of an affair between Jack and a young woman in her chorus line. Bessie literally threw the woman off the train car and proceeded to chase Jack through the railroad station, firing a gun at him.

The circumstances surrounding Bessie's death are wrapped in controversy. A magazine writer claimed that she had died because a whites-only hospital had refused her treatment. Such an account was anything but farfetched in the Mississippi of 1937, and the story became accepted fact. But over the years the story has been largely discredited.

### **Class Discussion Questions**

1. How did Bessie's street singing help her as a performer? Later in her life, what effects did the Depression, new music tastes and her alcohol addiction have on her?
2. For decades, it was believed that Ms. Smith died after her auto accident because she was refused treatment at a segregated (whites only) hospital. This has recently been somewhat debunked. If this is indeed legend and not fact, what are some factors and actual events that would make people continue to believe it?
3. Look at the lyrics of "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out" below. (See Supplemental Information section) What do you think drew Bessie to this song?
4. Examine a poster advertising one of Ms. Smith's records during her career. What does it tell you about how African Americans were perceived in the 1920's?

### **Suggested Activities**

1. Read a book about Bessie Smith. Make a presentation to the class in one of the following ways:
  - A. Pretend you are Bessie Smith and tell the class about your life
  - B. Create a collage, painting or art piece that reflects her life
  - C. Write a poem, short story, or mock diary about her.
2. In an essay, compare and contrast Bessie Smith's life with a currently popular musician of your choice. How were their lives different? How were they the same? What challenges did each of them have to face? What opportunities does the modern artist have that were denied Ms. Smith?
3. Perform one of Bessie's songs for the class, then discuss what the "interior monologue" (the deeper, ultimate message) of the song is.
4. Divide the class into groups of 4-7. Each group will write and perform a play depicting a different era of Bessie's life.

### **Supplemental Information**

## **Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out**

By Jimmie Cox

Once I lived the life of a millionaire,  
Spending all my money, I didn't care.  
I took all my friends out for a good time,  
Buyin' high-price liquor, champagne and wine.

When I began to fall so low,  
I didn't have a friend, and no place to go.  
If I ever get my hands on a dollar again,  
I'm gonna hang on to it 'til the eagle grins.

Nobody knows you when you're down and out.  
In your pocket, not one penny,  
And as for friends, you haven't any.

But if you ever get on your feet again,  
Then you'll meet your old longlost friends.  
It's mighty strange, without a doubt,  
Nobody knows you when you're down and out.

### **Linked Text**

**Apollo Theater:** Historic theater in the Harlem section of New York City, legendary for blues and jazz shows.

**Blues:** Genre of African American folk and popular music, predominantly in 3/4 time; descended from spirituals.

**Depression:** Period of severe economic dysfunction. The Great Depression of the 1930s was worldwide and comprised the worst economic downturn in American history.

**Grammy:** Annual awards given by the recording industry.

**Rainey, Gertrude ("Ma"):** Blues singer largely responsible for making the music commercially popular around 1910.

**Spiritual:** Religious music rooted in African slave song.

**Tent Show:** Common venue for vaudeville-like variety shows in the early twentieth century.

### **Additional Resources**

#### **Books :**

**Bessie** by Chris Albertson (Stein and Day, 1972)

**Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920's** by Daphne Duval Harrison (Rutgers University Press, 1988)

**The Story of the Blues** by Paul Oliver (Chilton Book Company, 1969)

#### **Websites:**

**Legacy: Bessie Smith**

<http://www.legacyrecordings.com/catalog/RootsAndBlues/bessie.htm>

**Bessie Smith Biography**

<http://www.technoir.net/Jazz/bessie.html>

This site contains over 1000 songs from her era in Real Audio 3 format, as well as hundreds of biographies and discographies of musicians.

**Films:**

**St. Louis Blues**, Directed by Dudley Murphy (1929)

An early "talkie" that Ms. Smith appeared in.

**Recordings :**

**Empress Of The Blues: The Bessie Smith Catalog**, Collector's Editions Records no. 2, release date 2/20/1996

**The Collection – Bessie Smith**, Columbia Catalog no. 44441, release date 3/28/1989

**The Essential Bessie Smith**, Columbia Catalog no. 64922, release date 09/23/1997.

Dan Sanders is a writer in California.