

# BESSIE SMITH

b. unknown – d. September 26, 1937

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



Details of Bessie Smith’s childhood, including the year of her birth, vary. Both of Smith’s parents died before her 9th birthday. As a child, she and her brother performed as a musical duo on the streets of Chattanooga, Tennessee, to support themselves.

In 1912, Smith joined a traveling troupe. While with the troupe, she met Blues singer Ma Rainey, who became Smith’s friend and mentor. Smith’s extraordinary talent as a blues singer, coupled with her vivacious personality, quickly landed her a solo act in Atlanta, Georgia. She entered the Eastern Seaboard vaudeville circuit and over the next 10 years her popularity soared.

Columbia Records signed her in 1923, and she quickly became the highest paid African-American entertainer of her time. She earned up to \$2,000 per week during the height of her career. Her successful first recording, “Down-Hearted Blues,” catapulted her to national success.

Smith toured the country and recorded over 160 songs accompanied by some of the greatest jazz instrumentalists of her time, including Louis Armstrong. From slow blues to jazz standards, Bessie Smith consistently produced original work with her broad range and versatility. Columbia Records upgraded her unrivaled status as “Queen of the Blues” to “Empress of the Blues.”

Five years after signing with Columbia Records, Smith’s career began to decline during the Great Depression. She made her last recording, featuring Benny Goodman, in 1933. Although she never received the same level of acclaim bestowed on her during her early career, Bessie Smith continued to perform in clubs until her death. She died shortly after a car accident in 1937.

**Known as the “Empress of the Blues,”  
Bessie Smith adorned the Harlem  
Renaissance with her penetrating,  
soulful voice.**



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