

**NAXOS**  
**BLUES**  
LEGENDS

# BESSIE SMITH

**VOL. 2**

*St Louis*  
**BLUES**

**ORIGINAL 1924-1925  
RECORDINGS**

*Featuring*

**FLETCHER  
HENDERSON**



*Aleka*

# **BESSIE SMITH** *Vol.2*

## **'St Louis Blues'** Original Recordings 1924-1925

At the time that Bessie Smith recorded the opening selection on this release, **Haunted House Blues**, she was three months shy of turning thirty and entering the period of her greatest popularity. Smith was headlining in her own show not only in the South but in such Northern cities as Chicago, Cleveland and Detroit. She appeared often on the radio and, most important for today's listeners, was recording frequently and earning her title of "The Empress Of The Blues".

Born 15 April 1894 in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Bessie Smith never knew her father (who died while she was very young) and her mother passed away when she was ten. Raised by an older sister and growing up poor, she first performed at an amateur contest when she was ten, often raising money for the family by singing in the streets with her brother backing her on guitar. In 1912 when Smith was eighteen, she joined the Moses Stokes troupe as a dancer. The company's vocalist was Ma Rainey, who is considered the first female blues singer and was an inspiration. Within a year or two, Smith was singing at Atlanta's "81" Theatre and quickly becoming a popular attraction. She worked regularly on the road with a variety of companies and gained a strong reputation throughout the South for her

powerful voice and highly expressive way of singing the blues. By 1920 she was heading her own show.

The blues craze began in 1920 when Mamie Smith had a major bestseller in "Crazy Blues". Suddenly the record labels, which had previously excluded black artists from the recording studios, went out of their way to document scores of female blues singers in hopes of duplicating Mamie Smith's success. Among the many discoveries were Ethel Waters, Alberta Hunter, Ida Cox and Ma Rainey, but none made a greater impact than Bessie Smith.

After auditioning unsuccessfully for the Edison label and recording two selections for Columbia on 15 February 1923 that for unknown reasons were rejected, Bessie Smith made her recording debut the following day. Her very first recording, Alberta Hunter's "Downhearted Blues", became a major hit and within a year she was the most famous and popular of the classic blues singers. That seemed only fitting because she had the strongest and most memorable voice. While many other singers on early recordings were defeated by the inferior technical quality of both the recording equipment and their accompanists, the Empress simply overrode both. Few other singers from 1923 are

listenable today but Smith, whether introducing “Tain’t Nobody’s Bizness If I Do” or putting a great deal of passion into “Jailhouse Blues” and “Mistreatin’ Daddy” (all to be found on Bessie Smith Vol.1: “Downhearted Blues”, Naxos Jazz Legends 8.120660), was way ahead of her contemporaries. In fact, she can be considered not only the finest blues singer of the 1920s but the first female jazz singer.

During the period covered by Naxos’ second Bessie Smith reissue (9 January 1924 to 27 May 1925), the singer recorded 38 selections. The eighteen best are on this set and most of the selections have the singer accompanied by players taken from the leading jazz big band of the time, the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra. **Haunted House Blues**, which has Smith dealing with both haunting spirits and sound effects, and **Eavesdropper’s Blues** (discussing the perils of eavesdropping) team the Empress with pianist Henderson and clarinetist Don Redman (Henderson’s brilliant arranger). **Haunted House Blues** is particularly unusual for having a one-bar extension in the middle of each chorus, making it a very rare 13 (rather than 12) bar blues.

Violinist Robert Robbins’ playing would distract most other singers but not Smith, who on **Frankie Blues** is heard at her most powerful. **Rainy Weather Blues** and **Salt Walter Blues** have Bessie interacting with the great trombonist Charlie Green. One of the first jazz players to swing consistently on record, Green’s tonal distortions and witty ideas always inspired

Smith. **Weeping Willow Blues** adds cornettist Joe Smith to the group and he immediately became a great favorite of Bessie, who loved his mellow tone and the way that he complemented her. **Sinful Blues** has Bessie joined by her new accompanist, pianist Fred Longshaw, a better player than Fletcher Henderson and a regular in her live performances. A particularly unique aspect to this performance is that Smith takes her only kazoo solo on records, ending the song quite effectively.

On 14 January 1925, Bessie Smith recorded the first of her sessions with Louis Armstrong. She may have preferred Joe Smith, but there was no better musical partner for her (at least among horn players) than the 23-year old Armstrong, who answers her statements with note-bending ideas that are both supportive and competitive. On a dramatic version of **St Louis Blues** (one of the finest ever recorded) and **Reckless Blues**, Longshaw switches to a reed organ which gives a church feel to the music. **Sobbin’ Hearted Blues**, **Cold In Hand Blues** and **You’ve Been A Good Old Wagon (But You Dun Broke Down)**, with Longshaw back on piano, continues the musical magic between the singer and the cornetist.

Smith is joined by seven musicians from the Henderson band on 5 May, including the first major tenor-saxophonist Coleman Hawkins and the fluent clarinetist Buster Bailey along with Joe Smith, Charlie Green and the Henderson rhythm section (*sans* drums). Although most famous for her blues singing, Smith was quite

capable of swinging popular songs, as she shows on the spirited **Cake Walkin' Babies From Home**. At the same session she waxed the definitive version of W. C. Handy's **Yellow Dog Blues**.

The final four selections on this collection all have Smith assisted by Charlie Green (who is showcased on **Soft Pedal Dance**) and Fletcher Henderson. Buster Bailey helps out on **Dixie Flyer Blues** (one of the earlier train songs) but it is the two reunions with Louis Armstrong (**Careless Love Blues** and **I Ain't Gonna Play No Second Fiddle**) that are the obvious classics.

In 1925, Bessie Smith had great success with her show in Chicago, she toured in the

South, North and Midwest, and she made as much as \$2,000 a week, a tremendous amount of money at the time, especially for a black performer. She was at the height of her powers, both artistically and commercially. And although there would be some hard times later in life, Bessie Smith would remain the unchallenged Empress of the Blues up until the time of her death on 26 September 1937. No one ever sang the blues with her power and passion.

*Scott Yanow*

— *author of seven jazz books including Classic Jazz (which covers the 1920s), Swing and Trumpet Kings*

## Personnel

**Bessie Smith**, vocal, on all sessions, with:

*9 January 1924*: Don Redman, clarinet; Fletcher Henderson, piano

*8 April 1924*: Robert Robbins, violin; Irving Johns, piano

*31 July, 8 August 1924 & 14 May 1925*: Charlie Green, trombone; Fletcher Henderson, piano

*26 September 1924*: Joe Smith, cornet; Charlie Green, trombone; Fletcher Henderson, piano

*11 December 1924*: Fred Longshaw, piano

*14 January 1925*: Louis Armstrong, piano; Fred

Longshaw, reed organ (tracks 8–9) and piano (tracks 10–12)

*5 & 6 May 1925*: HENDERSON'S HOT SIX. Joe Smith, cornet; Charlie Green, trombone; Buster Bailey, clarinet; Coleman Hawkins, tenor sax; Fletcher Henderson, piano; Charlie Dixon, banjo; Ralph Escudero, tuba

*15 May 1925*: Buster Bailey, clarinet; Charlie Green, trombone; Fletcher Henderson, piano

*26 & 27 May 1925*: Louis Armstrong, cornet; Charlie Green, trombone; Fletcher Henderson, piano

1. **Haunted House Blues** 3:13  
(J. C. Johnson)  
Columbia 14010-D, mx 81466-1  
Recorded 9 January 1924
2. **Eavesdropper's Blues** 2:57  
(J. C. Johnson)  
Columbia 14010-D, mx 81469-1  
Recorded 9 January 1924
3. **Frankie Blues** 3:28  
(Perry Bradford)  
Columbia 14023-D, mx 81675-2  
Recorded 8 April 1924
4. **Rainy Weather Blues** 3:33  
(George Brooks)  
Columbia 14037-D, mx 81907-1  
Recorded 8 August 1924
5. **Salt Water Blues** 3:25  
(George Brooks)  
Columbia 14037-D, mx 81892-1  
Recorded 31 July 1924
6. **Weeping Willow Blues** 3:06  
(P. Carter)  
Columbia 14042-D, mx 140062-2  
Recorded 26 September 1924
7. **Sinful Blues** 3:08  
(Perry Bradford)  
Columbia 14052-D, mx 140162-5  
Recorded 11 December 1924
8. **The St Louis Blues** 3:06  
(W. C. Handy)  
Columbia 14064-D, mx 140241-1  
Recorded 14 January 1925
9. **Reckless Blues** 2:58  
(Fred Longshaw-Jack Gee)  
Columbia 14056-D, mx 140242-1  
Recorded 14 January 1925
10. **Sobbin' Hearted Blues** 2:58  
(Bradford-Layer-Davis)  
Columbia 14056-D, mx 140249-2  
Recorded 14 January 1925
11. **Cold In Hand Blues** 3:10  
(Fred Longshaw-Jack Gee)  
Columbia 14064-D, mx 140250-2  
Recorded 14 January 1925
12. **You've Been A Good Old Wagon** 3:22  
(Bessie Smith-Balcom)  
Columbia 14079-D, mx 140251-1  
Recorded 14 January 1925
13. **Cake Walkin' Babies (From Home)** 3:07  
(Bessie Smith-A. Troy-Clarence Williams)  
With Henderson's Hot Six  
Columbia 35673, mx W 140585-2  
Recorded 5 May 1925
14. **Yellow Dog Blues** 2:56  
(W. C. Handy)  
Columbia 14075-D, mx W 140586-1  
With Henderson's Hot Six  
Recorded 6 May 1925
15. **Soft Pedal Blues** 3:13  
(Bessie Smith)  
Columbia 14075-D, mx W 140601-2  
Recorded 14 May 1925
16. **Careless Love Blues** 3:26  
(W. C. Handy)  
Columbia 14083-D, mx W 140626-1  
Recorded 26 May 1925

17. **Dixie Flying Blues** 3:06  
(Bessie Smith)  
Columbia 14079-D, mx W 140607-1  
Recorded 15 May 1925
18. **I Ain't Goin' To Play No Second Fiddle**  
3:24  
(Bessie Smith)  
Columbia 14090-D, mx W 140630-1  
Recorded 27 May 1925

All selections recorded in New York  
Transfers & Production: David Lennick  
Digital Noise Reduction: Graham Newton  
Original 78s from the collections of Roger  
Misiewicz and John Wilby  
Original monochrome photo of Leadbelly from  
Michael Ochs Archives / Redferns

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BESSIE SMITH St Louis Blues

NAXOS BLUES LEGENDS

**BESSIE SMITH** *Vol.2***"ST LOUIS BLUES"** Original 1924-1925 Recordings

8.120691

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\* *With Louis Armstrong on cornet*

Transfers and Production by David Lennick  
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NOTES AND FULL RECORDING DETAILS INCLUDED

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