Smith, Bessie (1894-1937) Encyclopedia Article

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Smith, Bessie (1894-1937)

Elizabeth "Bessie" Smith was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and became known as the "empress of the blues." She began her career with Chappelle's Rabbit Foot Minstrels, starring Ma Rainey, who taught Smith the art of blues singing. Smith developed her own style of powerful and theatrical blues with a jazz orientation, which became the accepted classic blues style. Her first recording, "Down Home Blues" (1923), sold 800,000 copies. She recorded until 1933, toured extensively with her troupe, the Liberty Belles, and appeared in the film *St. Louis Blues* (1929). Smith died while touring when her car was hit by a truck and run off the road in Mississippi.

Further Reading:

Albertson, Chris. *Bessie.* New York, Stein and Day, 1972.