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Bessie



Synopsis

Imperative for all jazz aficionados. DS Publishers Weekly

Book Information

Paperback: 253 pages

Publisher: Stein & Day (January 1, 1972)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0812817001

ISBN-13: 978-0812817003

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.4 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (23 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

I discovered Bessie Smith's music in the late 80's/early 90's when Sony/Legacy released a 4-box "Complete Recordings" series spanning her whole recording career from 1923, when she signed to Columbia Records' "Race Records" division and became a huge star with the low-down raw blues songs that were popular with both blacks and whites of the time, all through the 1920's, to the depression era, where her popularity faded and the real-life blues of people on breadlines eclipsed the romantic & hard times blues in her most popular recordings. "Folks don't wanna hear the blues no 'mo, times is hard!" Bessie was heard to exclaim to her closest friends. Born in or around April 1894, in Chattanooga, TN into abject poverty, suffocating Jim Crow racism, child abuse, desolation all around her, the young tall stringy black girl named Bessie Smith learned to scarp for survival at very early age. Her and her brother Clarence took to the streets at a young age as "buck dancers" and minstrel-type skit performers, which over time, Bessie developed perfect comedic timing, slick dance moves, presence, and a voice that could stop people in their tracks and put them in a trance! People who heard Bessie in person said that her singing was clear, powerful and went straight to your soul! It was like a religious experience some said, except in her day the blues was seen as crude and profane by narrow-minded church types who saw her as a tortured soul singing the devil's music who would surely burn in hell for all eternity!

Bessie Smith is near the top of my lists of artists I'd love to go back in time to hear, if I had access to a time machine. No footage, save "St. Louis" Blues, of any of her performances exists. And while she left a treasure trove of recordings from nearly every phase of her career (except for the last), very little of her story has every been told except for repeated myths. This book rights that egregious wrong is righted by Chris Albertson's book. Meticulously researched, Albertson's well written book is the most intimate look at Smith's life we are likely to get. Much of what Albertson recounts, in fact, comes directly from people who were close to Bessie Smith, and who worked with her. Along the way, Albertson unflinchingly debunks some of the oldest legends about Smith, up to and including the truth about the circumstances of Smith's death. Albertson expertly pulls back focus to give readers a picture of the times in which Smith lived and worked, during a 27-year-long career, just enough to give the reader a complete picture before zooming in on Smith again. The result is not just a record of the life of Bessie Smith, but a record of her life and times. Albertson uses Columbia Records archives to tell the story of Smith's recording sessions throughout her career, offering brief reviews of Smith's recorded performances, and note her collaborations with other legendary artists from Jellyroll Morton, to Louis Armstrong and Bennie Goodman. It was enough to send me to iTunes to download some of Smith's catalog. Afterward, I took to reading the book while listening to Smith's music as a soundtrack. If you've heard these songs before, you may listen with new perspective after reading Albertson's account of the recording sessions.

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