

Bessie Smith Transcript Season 4, Episode 1

Hello, and welcome to the Time Pieces History Podcast. This is the start of season four, and it's all about remarkable women. This season was inspired by my conversation with FOMO creator May King Tsang, where she discussed some badass women who inspired her, and who's a bit of a badass herself (listen back to that [here](#)).

I've chosen 12 women from throughout history to look at during the season, and today we're kicking things off with American blues singer Bessie Smith, who is sadly not as well-remembered as she deserves to be.

We'll be having a bonus interview show at the end of the season, but I'll also be including one midway through, to mark the 50th episode of the Time Pieces History Podcast. I'll be reflecting on what I've covered so far, as well as my future plans and exactly who this show is for.

Don't forget, you can access the shownotes and an episode transcript on my website – www.gudrunlauret.com/podcast and leave a comment too. You can also get yourself a copy of my [eBook](#) – Five Content Ideas for Heritage Organisations.

I'm also very excited about my new [resource library](#), which is for anyone working in the history and heritage sector. It's priced at £7.99 per month, and you have access to everything in there for as long as you're a member.

There are workbooks, videos and guides to all things content marketing, including identifying your ideal customer and what they want, what content marketing is and how to get started, and more. And new things are added every month.

I first came across Bessie Smith on a visit to my brother, who lives in Ghent, Belgium. My little brother used to look up to me and listen to the same music that I did, which at the time was an odd mixture of Britpop and old rock bands. He quickly grew out of my tastes, though, and as a professional musician is often snifty about what I listen to.

We went to a bar one night which had a tiny stage in the corner. On the back wall was a larger-than-life, black and white photo of a grinning Bessie, wearing a sparkly dress and emerging through a curtain, looking for all the world as if she were going to show us exactly how she earned her nickname of 'Empress of the Blues.'

I decided to find out more about her, and got a hold of one of the only books written about her to date, along with a best-of CD. I learned that she had been an early proponent of blues whose career was cut short by her early death in a car crash in 1937.

Bessie was around at the time when blues music came to the attention of mainstream listeners, and was surprisingly popular with white audiences in parts of America. Little is known of her early life, although the author managed to piece together quite a bit, as when he wrote the first edition of the book in the 1970s, many of her contemporaries were still alive.

Chris Albertson paints a vivid picture of this larger than life character, a big, tough woman who was a hard drinker, a fighter and a lover, who also possessed one of the most remarkable voices, not just of her generation but of all time.

The majority of the anecdotes came from Ruby Walker, the niece of Bessie's estranged husband and a chorine (backing singer/dancer) in many of the shows. The stories are so fantastic that they sound made up, but I'm inclined to think they're all true.

Bessie was brought up by her older sister in poverty in the Deep South. She followed her older brother Clarence into showbusiness, and he later became her tour manager.

Her career took off when Columbia Records signed her in 1923, and she recorded regularly for them until she died, sometimes going into the studio while she was touring. She was accompanied by successful musicians of the day, including a very young Louis Armstrong.

Bessie participated in TOBA (Theatre Owners Booking Association) tours, which involved packing up her entourage and taking them on the road, performing week-long residencies in various towns.

This was what a lot of artists did, and rather than the focus being just on the singer, there was often comedy, dancing and sketches and the venues were packed every night. This was something I'd never heard of, but was significant in the days before talking films became a cheap form of entertainment for the masses.

Bessie's success led to great wealth, and she was always generous with her money. She paid for her family to move from Tennessee to Philadelphia to be nearer to her, and purchased a railroad car to carry her performers.

When they wanted to move to a new city, they had to wait for an engine to pick them up and move them down the track. Bessie also bought lavish gifts for her husband Jack Gee, often to make up for a disagreement.

Their marriage was turbulent almost from the beginning, with infidelities on both sides. Gee served as Bessie's manager but was mostly ineffective at this, and Clarence was the real brains.

Jack didn't approve of Bessie's drinking binges, and Albertson's book is full of tales, recounted by Ruby, of Bessie escaping from hotel rooms or venues to avoid a violent confrontation with her husband.

It was also interesting to read about black history, and the frankly odd views held by the white population of America. While Bessie Smith and her peers were feted by white liberals and welcomed into many white establishments, they were expected to know their place. Sometimes they appeared on stage dressed as a "mammy" and contemporary news reports describe black audiences as little better than uneducated children. Depressing but not unexpected.

Over the course of her career, she produced 160 recordings for Columbia Records, usually accompanied by the best jazz and blues musicians of the day, and she appeared on the radio, including live performance broadcasts.

The Great Depression of 1929 put an end to the glory days of TOBA and the music industry almost went out of business. Bessie continued to tour, performing in clubs and even appeared very briefly in a short-lived Broadway play – critics panned it but praised her performance. She had a small film role in *St Louis Blues*, where she sang the title song.

Her career had a brief resurgence in 1933, when she was asked to record some swing tracks. Unfortunately, we don't know what Bessie might have done next, as she was injured in a collision when her car, driven by her boyfriend, crashed into the back of a lorry he may have been trying to overtake.

By chance, a surgeon was the first person on the scene, and noted Bessie had lost a lot of blood and her right arm, probably out of the window at the time of the accident, was almost completely severed.

Dr Smith (no relation) asked his passenger to run to the nearest house and call an ambulance. The tragedy for Bessie was that the ambulance didn't arrive in time. And by an awful quirk of fate, just as the doctor and his friend were preparing to transport her to hospital themselves, an oncoming car crashed into his, knocked into Bessie's and then ricocheted back into the doctor's vehicle. The ambulance eventually arrived, but she did not regain consciousness.

Thanks for listening! Please tune in on Thursday for the next episode. Don't forget to leave me a review, and if you work in the heritage sector, grab yourself a copy of my free [eBook](#) – Five Content Ideas for Heritage Sites, or sign up to the [resource library](#).