

Bessie Smith

1894-1937

Name _____

Form _____

Bessie Smith's influence has left a lasting impression on music. Copy out the article on "The Empress of Blues" – completing the blanks and unscrambling as you go, then tackle the activities.



Bessie Smith – *The Empress of Blues* – was one of the greatest blues **si** _____ **rs** of the twentieth century and became the most successful **CALKB** American performer of her time.

Born in poverty in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1894, she grew up dreaming of a life in show _____ **ss**. Although her parents died when she was a child, her older brother, Clarence, encouraged her to join him in a travelling minstrel troupe, where she became the protégé of one of the best-known of the early women **UBELS** singers, Ma Rainey.

The talented teenager quickly blossomed as a **CENARD** and comedian, but it was her extraordinary singing voice, deep, powerful, and exp _____ **ve**, which established her as an important new presence in music. She moved north to Atlantic City, then onto New York, where she signed a con _____ **ct** with Columbia Records in 1923. Her first recording was *Downhearted Blues*, which sold a phenomenal 800,000 copies and she went on to record with many leading **ZAJZ** musicians from Louis Armstrong to Coleman Hawkins and Benny Goodman.



During the height of her pop _____ **ty** in the 1920's she was earning several thousand dollars a week. She continued to tour as well as record, but when America's musical tastes began to change towards **DAROI** and swing music in the 1930's, her car _____ **r** took a nosedive and she was dropped by Columbia. Increasingly addicted to alcohol, she continued to per _____ **m** live, but died in a car crash in Mississippi in 1937, at the age of 43.

Bessie Smith was ahead of her time in many ways. She sang raw country blues inspired by the harsh conditions of like in the Deep **TUOSH** and affected by her own experiences of oppr _____ **ion** both as a woman and as a black American. She left a rich legacy of some 160 recordings which have become blues **LISCACS** and influenced many great fee _____ **e** singers who have come after her, like Billie Holiday, Aretha Franklin and even 1960's rock legend **INAJ**s Joplin.

1. By what title is Bessie Smith sometimes known?
2. When and where was she born?
3. What did she dream of as a child, and how did she start her career?
4. Whose protégé was she in the early years?
5. What was Bessie Smith's greatest talent?
6. Which record company did she sign to, and what was her first recording?
7. What was the period of her greatest popularity, and which famous musicians did she work with?
8. How did America's musical tastes change, and how did the affect her career?
9. Explain why she is considered to be ahead of her time.
10. Which female singers has she influenced?

