

Bessie Smith – The Complete Recordings Vol.5 (1931-1933)

Written by bluesever

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CD I:

- 1) *Need A Little Sugar In My Bowl*;
- 2) *Safety Mama*;
- 3) *Do Your Duty*;
- 4) *Gimme A Pigfoot*;
- 5) *Take Me For A Buggy Ride*;
- 6) *I'm Down In The Dumps*;
- 7) *The Yellow Dog Blues*; [play](#)
- 8) *Soft Pedal Blues*;
- 9) *Nashville Women's Blues*;
- 10) *Careless Love Blues*; [play](#)
- 11) *Muddy Water*;
- 12) *St. Louis Blue Soundtrack — Band Intro*;
- 13) *Crap Game*;
- 14) *St. Louis Blues*;

CD II:

Ruby Smith interviews.

The last installment in the Bessie Smith saga, just as all the previous ones, is a fully priced 2-CD package, out of which the non-historian really needs a grand total of six songs. Of course, it would have been fairly easy to squeeze those six onto the remaining disc space of Vol. 4 — but would that count as the true raffinated sparkle of Columbia's marketing genius?

Let us see what else we have here. First, a bunch of crappy-sounding outtakes from a 1925 session: five crackling cuts, all of which we have already heard in superior versions on Vol. 2. Just what we need to hear in order to truly comprehend the giant stature of the Empress.

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Second, three tracks that reproduce, in complete form, the soundtrack to the short film *St. Louis Blues*, shot in 1929 and featuring Bessie's only preserved live appearance. The footage (which you can, and should, see on Youtube) is obviously priceless, and the semi-live rendition of 'St. Louis Blues' it-self, on which Bessie is backed not by Armstrong, but a huge black choir instead, is nice to have on CD, but the six-minute dialog sequence ('Crap Game') is a complete waste of space unless you want to have a crash course in African American Vernacular as spoken in the 1920s (except the sound quality is so awful you would still need subtitles).

Finally, the entire second disc is only indirectly related to Bessie; it is an interview CD, where Bessie's niece-by-marriage, Ruby Smith, recounts her memories of Bessie in a grueling seventy-minute session. Which is fine and dandy, but you might just as well read a book about Bessie rather than spend all this time trying to sort the wheat from the chaff and separate objective fact from biased personal feeling — never for one moment able to understand why exactly does this need to co-exist in one package with Bessie's actual music.

Unfortunately, what with all the ripping-off, the six real songs that make this «Final Chapter» worth owning are all classics, unexpendable for even the casual Bessie lover. Two date from a lonesome super-short session in 1931, four more from a similarly brief stunt in 1933; this is all that Bessie had the opportunity to produce in her last decade, before a complete goodbye to the recording industry and, eventually, a tragic death in a car accident in 1937.

The songs are pure vaudeville, no blues — urban blues was not something the people took to as lightly in the hungry 1930s as they did in the booming 1920s (it is, after all, one thing to listen about someone being miserable when you yourself are reasonably content, but a whole different story when your own misery is comparable). 'Need A Little Sugar In My Bowl' is arguably the dirtiest song Bessie ever did (she also needs a hot dog between her rolls, and other delights too scandalous to mention), yet somehow she manages to transform this pure anthem of lust into a song of soulful mourning, almost as if all the sugar and hot dog references had some further spiri-tual connotations attached. Accustomed as we are to all the cock rock hits on classic rock radio, it is hardly surprising to see words of love used as a metaphor for sex — but using culinary words as metaphors for sex and meta-metaphors for love, that is something else totally.

The last four songs from 1933 almost play as a mini-musical: Bessie demands of her man that he 'Do Your Duty' (same one as above, apparently), lets it all hang out on 'Gimme A Pigfoot' (and a bottle of beer, even though Prohibition was still in action), after the hangover, gets unusually sen-ti-mental ('Take Me For A Buggy Ride'), and, finally, gets dumped by both the guy and whoever else she could possibly be dumped by ('I'm Down In The Dumps'). Everything

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Bessie ever had is in these four tunes: arrogance, recklessness, sweetness, misery, determination, humour, sadness, the whole palette. Obviously, she had no idea this was going to be her musical testament, but that's how it turned out, and these four tunes are as perfect a swan song for the lady as Abbey Road would be for the Beatles.

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