

Bessie Smith

Bessie Smith was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1894. (The exact date is unknown.) She was one of seven children born to William and Laura Smith.

Bessie's parents both died while she was young and she was raised by her older sister Viola. Even as a youngster, Bessie had a beautiful voice and her oldest brother, Clarence encouraged Bessie to pursue a singing career. Bessie and her brother Andrew sang and performed on Chattanooga street corners earning pennies and nickels from passersby.

In 1911, Bessie began working for the Moses Stokes Company. [Ma Rainey](#) who also worked for Moses Stokes heard her singing and in 1912 Bessie joined Ma's group, the Rabbit Foot Minstrels.

By the time Bessie was 27 she was already an established star. She began auditioning for record companies in 1921 and was told that her voice was too rough to record. However, in 1923, Columbia Records signed her to a contract and Bessie recorded Gulf Coast Blues and Down Hearted Blues accompanied by Clarence Williams on the piano. Bessie recorded over 150 songs for Columbia including the blues classics Mama's Got the Blues, Nobody Knows When Your Down and Out, and Poor Man's Blues.

Bessie began drinking heavily in her late teens and her alcoholism continued to worsen over time. Her career began to falter in the 1930s due to her drinking and poor management of her affairs.

Bessie was driving through Clarksdale Mississippi with her friend Richard Morgan on September 27, 1937 when she was involved in a fatal automobile accident. Her arm was completely severed and Bessie bled to death.

Bessie Smith, The Empress of Blues, was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1989.

Sources:

[Encyclopedia Britannica](#)

[Encyclopedia Africana](#)