Like the Roots of a Tree: Bessie Smith and the Blues

A voice calls out harsh and pure. A voice that bleeds sadness and longing. Sharp, biting, direct, this voice channels heartache, heartbreak. Where did this sound come from? Who is attached to the despair that calls out through the speakers? This is the voice of the "Empress of the Blues," Bessie Smith, a title one might be surprised to see bestowed on an African American women in the pre-civil rights era. Bessie Smith is a critical component of African American musical history, and thusly, the history of American music as a whole. As contemporary bassist Christian McBride describes it, jazz exists on a continuum, and, like a tree, grows from its roots. "'I view the tradition as being like the roots of a tree,' McBride explains, 'But you can't just have the roots. Something's got to grow out of that: different branches, leaves, the tree's going to get taller'" (Chinen). In using this metaphor, McBride is aligning himself with many jazz masters, who established this concept of foundation and growth as a way of understanding the evolution of the genre. It is a functional metaphor; roots ground the tree, leaves and branches are the new growth that emerge from the old. Using this concept as the basis for a definition of continuity in the jazz tradition, one can see how Smith fits into the picture. As this paper will explore, Smith's early career exists at the earlier end of this musical spectrum, at the height of the vaudeville era and the cusp of stardom for a few lucky (and highly qualified) female blues singers (Southern 299). The end of her career, tragically cut short, spanned the swing era and the beginning of World War II. In just six short years of fame, Smith managed to have a following in the millions and treat her stardom with what biographer Chris Albertson describes as her "feet firmly grounded" (Albertson 7).

As Albertson states in his biography "Bessie," there were, before 1970, very few credible resources on Bessie Smith. The resources that did exist were not accurate, often written by volunteer writers being paid by venues to write about Smith. Other problems included duplicate information

reprinted in various sources and the pervasiveness of myths and exaggerated stories. Albertson states that if all this duplicate and dubious information was eliminated, "there would remain no more than ten to fifteen pages" (Albertson vii.) Alberston's biography is all the more important, then, in light of this lack of information. He has gone to great lengths to procure the interviews and information needed to compile his 291 page work, which is regarded by other authors as easily the most comprehensive on the singer (Friedwald 2). His primary source for a great deal of the material in the book is one of Bessie's touring partners, Ruby Walker, a chorus line dancer. For this reason, I will mostly be referring to Albertson's work for biographical information on Smith (as well as Rainey), while referring to other sources for additional musical and historical information, as his book remains, to this day, the most complete source of such information on the singer. There are a number of recent interesting and useful sources with musical analysis and contemporary perspectives on Smith, including information about modern singers who cite Smith as a direct influence.

The socio-economic circumstances of many early jazz artists lives were unbelievably tough, worse than one can begin to comprehend today. Their complete poverty was exacerbated by their race (Albertson 7). One notable exception from this rule was Bix Beiderbecke, whose rebelled against his wealthy family that put him in a private boarding school. He was white, however. Louis Armstrong grew up in a neighborhood of New Orleans nicknamed the "Battlefield" because of the extremely high level of violence occurred there (Newton). Such was the case for Smith, whose neighborhood in Chattanooga was composed of impoverished African Americans working "low-paying, demeaning jobs" (Albertson 7). The simple fact that Bessie Smith's birthday was not officially recorded by the state government illustrates the truth that Southern governments still had not fully recognized black Americans as equals. Albertson goes as far to say that the government, "made little distinction between its black population

and its dogs" (Albertson 7). This is especially significant considering that slavery had been outlawed more than thirty years before; things were slow to change. Albertson makes this quote in the context of describing how Bessie's exact day of birth is not known. The date given on her 1923 application for a marriage license is, however, believed to be correct. As we know from the current racial climate in the United States, attitudes about race do not change quickly, however job opportunities have improved for African Americans since the early 20th century. While a small black middle class began to emerge in Chattanooga at the end of the 19th century, most African Americans, "faced a future of servitude" (Albertson 7). The only "out" of this lifestyle was show business, which, "offered a tempting alternative to those who were so inclined" (Albertson 13). Such was the path that Smith chose.

To understand the music that she went on to make, one must look at Smith's early life, which was characterized by tumult and uncertainty. She was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee on April 15, 1894 (one of a couple different dates from various sources.) In 1900 Chattanooga's population was 50% African American. (Albertson 7). While there was an emerging black middle class (comprised mostly of teachers), most blacks lived in destitute poverty that effectively kept them enslaved. This climate led Smith to choose early on to take the path of the entertainer, aforementioned as the only available route out of poverty for blacks in Chattanooga. Smith's parents had met on an Alabama plantation before settling down to have eight children. A lack of food and money for medical care caused Smith to lose both her father and mother before reaching the age of nine. This family tragedy left Smith's oldest sibling Viola to take care of her and her six siblings (the seventh had died shortly before Bessie was born.) Unfortunately Viola and Bessie's sister Tinnie both became mothers themselves shortly after their parents passed away. Nevertheless, Viola managed to take care of the family and move them into a tenement that gave them slightly more space than what they had had in their parents

cabin. Viola forced all of the siblings who were old enough to work and to contribute to the shared family income. It was at this point that Bessie began singing in the street (Albertson 8). Her and her brother Andrew would perform together. She would sing and dance while he played guitar behind her. Childhood friends of the family remembered Bessie being "feisty and uninhibited" (Albertson 8). Bessie would sing popular vaudeville songs and solicit money from passersby, something that she particularly good at. She was remembered during this period as being a great performer, comfortable interacting with the audience and dancing, which is remarkable for someone her age. Bessie's older brother Clarence was also interested in becoming involved in the entertainment business; Bessie looked up to Clarence more than she looked up to any of her other siblings (Albertson 9). As Bessie prepared herself for "bigger things" her brother Clarence provided her with support. Viola was against the idea of her siblings taking this route, urging them to make money by what she considered to be more "honest" means. It wasn't until Vaudeville first came to Chattanooga in 1910 that Clarence left the family. He was hired as a comedian and master of ceremonies after passing an audition. He kept his departure a secret, fearing that Bessie would want to go with him. Bessie was hurt by her brother's leaving. She missed daydreaming and planning for the future with him (Albertson 11). When Clarence returned to Tennessee in 1912 he was able to secure an audition for Bessie that got her hired to the Moses Stokes company, the same one that he was a part of. Just a year later Bessie was performing with a different Vaudeville company which included the person who would have the most influence on her, both personally and, to a lesser extent, musically: Ma Rainey. This association put Smith on the path to success and to some important life changes.

Rainey was the first of the so called "classic blues" singers. She was born as Gertrude Pridgett in Columbus Georgia on April 26, 1886, but changed her last name when she married William "Pa"

Rainey . She received the moniker “Ma” because of another nickname given to her by a record producer, “Mother of the Blues.” Although it is clear that this was a marketing technique devised by her record company, Albertson thinks that it is an appropriate one; she is the earliest known connection between the male dominated genre of country blues and the female driven “classic blues” genre (Albertson 12). Rainey first heard the blues at age 16 (in 1902) while performing in Missouri. She learned the song that she heard that day on the road and thereafter incorporated it into her vaudeville routines. It was so different than most of what was being sung at the time that she was often asked what kind of music it was. Rainey became popular for, and associated with, singing songs that she described as “blues.” Some think that she is responsible for coining the term “blues,” while others such as biographer Sandra Lieb think that the term was first used to describe the music as early as the end of the 19th century. Regardless, what is clear is that Rainey played an important role in popularizing the genre; she became associated with the musical idiom. Eileen Southern describes Rainey as the “earliest professional blues singer” (Southern 332). Those from the generation before Rainey have a different perspective on the blues and its origins. Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff’s work “Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya” (cited by Eileen Southern) describes old blues singers who viewed the blues as timeless and ageless. When asked about its origins they laughed, “‘The blues? Ain’t no first blues! The blues always been’” (Southern 332). Before Rainey blues was not performed in formal venues. Instead, it was the music of blacks in the rural South, centered around the Mississippi delta. It was also associated with the “lowly” (Southern 333), repelling church goers while being welcomed in red light districts across the area (Southern 333). These sociocultural characteristics influenced the musical features of the blues.

Rainey and Smith’s association was a close one personally, but Albertson thinks that Rainey’s musical influence was limited. Albertson writes that Bessie was the best of the female blues singers and

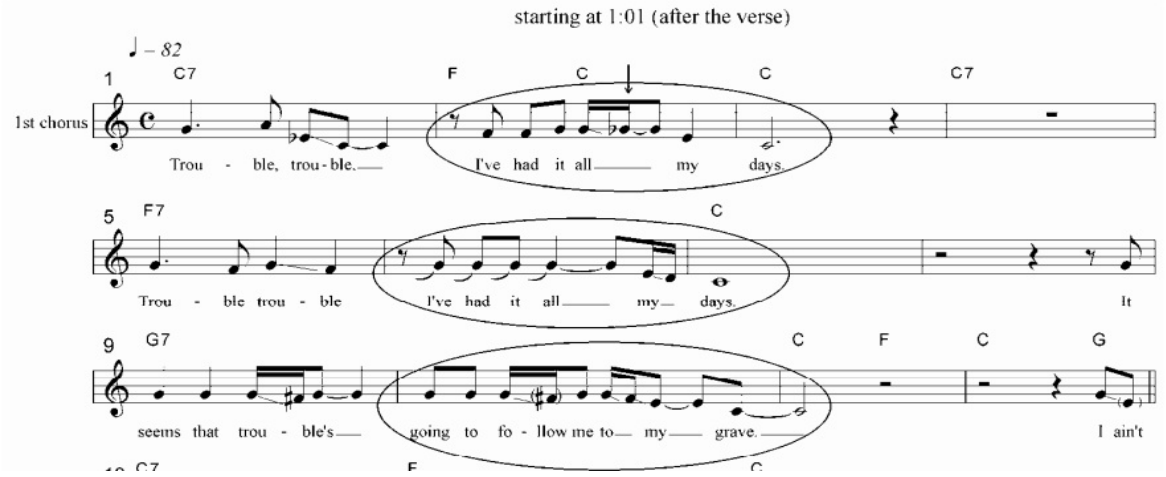
that Ma Rainey was "second only to Bessie" (Albertson 12). Albertson makes a point to dispel these myths about Ma Rainey's supposed enormous influence over Bessie's vocal style. He writes, "Early jazz writers made the apocryphal assumption that Ma Rainey taught Bessie to sing..." (Albertson 13-14). The most fanciful of the myths about the Smith-Rainey relationship is that Rainey kidnapped a young Bessie so that she could train her. This is simply false, he goes on to say. His source Ruby Walker remembered instances where Smith and Rainey would laugh about how their relationship was characterized in public. Furthermore, those who remember Bessie upon her arrival to the vaudeville scene recall an individual who was "a good singer before she left Chattanooga" (Albertson 14). Bessie's first accompanist Thomas A. Dorsey remembered things similarly, "...I don't recall Ma Rainey ever having taken credit for helping her" (Albertson 15). Rainey's roll was more that of a mentor, of a close family member. Albertson writes that Bessie may have received "a few show business tricks" (Albertson 14) from the more experienced Rainey, as well as perhaps a few songs. Maud recalled that Rainey was "more like a mother to her" (Albertson 14). This characterization summarizes the sentiments of others who knew Bessie and Rainey when they were touring together in the Moses Stokes company. Later Bessie would part ways with the Raineys to be a featured performer in other vaudeville companies.

Smith is considered the best of the classic blues singers from a musical standpoint, but what is it exactly about her voice and musicality that make her such an important figure in American music? She is unanimously praised by scholars in African American music. Samuel A. Floyd Jr. writes in his book *The Power of Black Music* that, "Bessie was dominant: her weighty voice, superb intonation, powerful emotional delivery, and subtle bending of blue notes were compelling and inimitable, setting her clearly apart from the other blues stylists of the period" (Floyd 108-109). Albertson describes her singing as "full-throated" (Albertson 34) and as having a "resonant voice" (Albertson 24) that won her fans across

the country; when describing her first recording for Columbia, "Down Hearted Blues," he mentions her "wonderful bent note" (Albertson 24) in the opening verse, and her "remarkably clear" (34) enunciation (both examples of her level of control and intent.) *The Music of Black Americans* introduces Bessie to readers by describing her as alternately earthy, raw, and sophisticated (Southern 372). Deeper musical analysis is required to provide specific insight. Israeli professor of music Alona Sagee provides us with just that. She echoes comments made by Floyd Albertson and Southern, citing many of the same features of her musicality, "Whether because of the powerful tone of her voice, her precise control of pitch, or her unique expressive ability, Bessie Smith imprinted her stamp on jazz, soul and pop singers for generations to come" (Sagee 117). This comment covers a lot of terrain, but includes these important features of Smith's voice, which are remarkably similar to Floyd's comments: vocal timbre (tone), intonation, and emotion dynamism. Sagee is responsible for a fantastic article titled "Bessie Smith: 'Down Hearted Blues' and 'Gulf Coast Blues' revisited" which is, Sagee believes, one of the only full transcriptions available today of a Bessie Smith performance. Sagee notes that there is a lack of musical transcription (and subsequent analysis) in writing on blues and early jazz; she hopes to remedy that situation. The following musical analysis demonstrates what Sagee describes as Bessie's "interpretative originality and expressive individuality" (Sagee 117).

In "Down Hearted Blues," perhaps the most famous of Bessie's recordings, this originality takes the shape of variations in rhythm, pitch, and inflection that occur in the second, sixth, and tenth bars of the 12 bar blues form over 4 consecutive choruses. These variations, which seem natural and perhaps even simple to the listener, are perfect examples of Smith's control over her voice and her ingenuity for phrasing. One might compare this adaptable phrasing to Armstrong's interpretation of melodies. Professor Newton of UCLA remarked, and I quote loosely, that jazz is all about nuance. These

subtleties add up to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.



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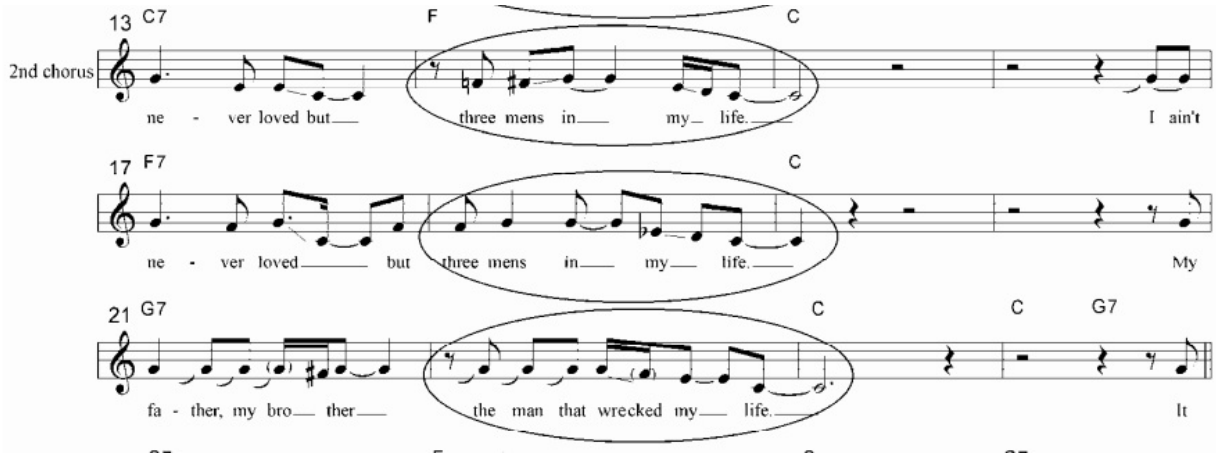

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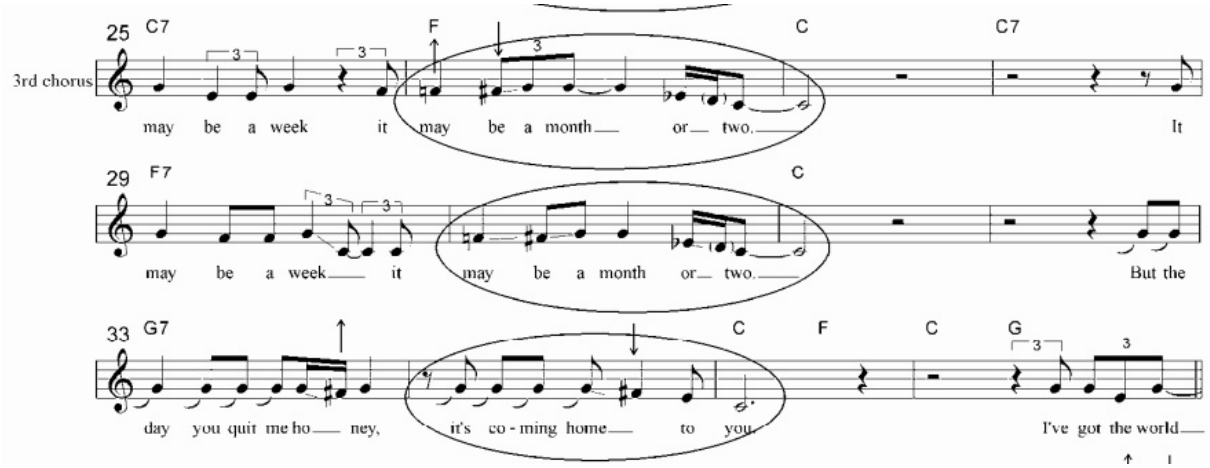

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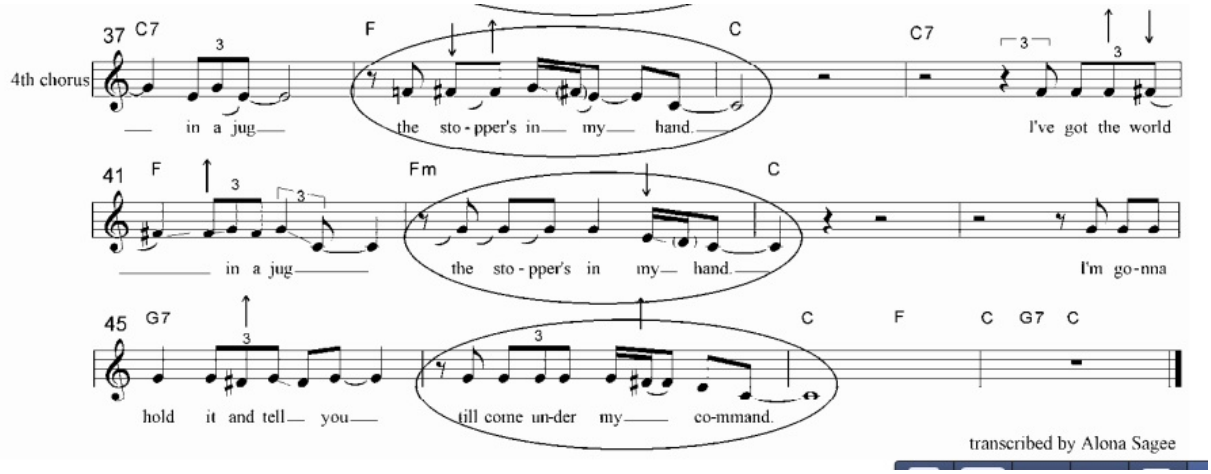

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One is struck by how Smith is able to vary these phrases while using mostly the same pitch material. She alters the rhythms and inflections to create different effects. This is perhaps most clear in chorus 1, where she essentially uses four pitches (plus an accidental "blue note") but alters the rhythm each time. In measure ten of chorus two one might notice how Smith repeats the the concert G four times, smoothly glissing up to it each time. One might also notice how she changes the rhythm of the words leading up to "life" each time (while keeping "life" on the "and" of four) ; in measure two we see "in my" on the 'four-e' sixteenth notes, while in measure six we see "in my" falling on the and of three and beat

four. Similar to variation in rhythm, one sees how Smith alters the quality of the third from phrase to phrase. In bar two she glisses down from the major third to the second, while in bars six and ten she glisses from the minor third to the second. This playfulness with regards to the tuning of the third is a function of cultural memory, writes Gerhard Kubik in his book *Africa and the Blues* (Kubik 56). His exhaustive fieldwork across Bantu speaking Africa has led him to discover that this liberal treatment of the third is a key feature of African and African-derived musics. Sagee's analysis of "Down Hearted Blues" leads her to conclude that, "Although Bessie's phrases display some similarities with each other, they constantly vary in imaginative ways, matching her with true jazz improvisers" (Sagee 117).

The recording of *Down Hearted Blues*, as well as *Gulf Coast Blues*, sold more than a million copies within the first year. This meant financial success for Bessie and for Columbia. Columbia records valued her musicality, but saw it first and foremost as means to make money, and as part of a package that included her showmanship and charisma:

> Bessie Smith possesses a voice of that peculiarly desirable quality for which the old fashioned colored folks of the South were so noted. She recognizes the value of this gift - and strives constantly to retain those qualities which many a colored entertainer has lost beyond recall through a mistaken desire to take on a so-called metropolitan polish. A consummate actress, Bessie Smith throws her whole personality into the characters of her songs (Albertson 64).

Despite the motivations behind the record company executives who originally signed Smith, her impact on the record industry can not be denied. Her recordings with Columbia represented crossover success

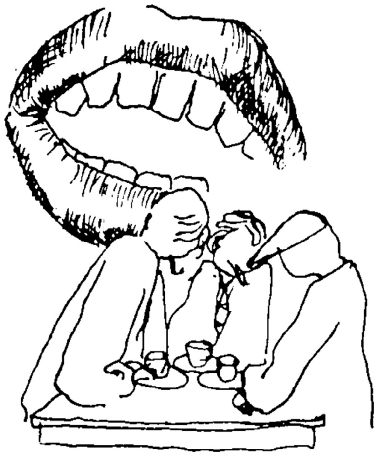
for the company, which was delighted to see middle class white audiences purchasing her records at unprecedented rates. Before Smith was signed with them, Columbia was reporting waning profits from so-called "race records" (the era's label for music recorded by African Americans for African Americans) (Albertson 63). Smith's original deal for the first three songs she recorded with Columbia guaranteed her $500 dollars at the outset, not a huge sum, but quite a lot for a black performer in this era, and quite a lot for Bessie, who had never been paid such an amount all at once. Unfortunately, her wily husband Richard Morgan would become her unofficial money manager and essentially take control of her finances to his advantage, but that is mostly beyond the scope of this paper. The money that was not appropriated by Morgan she often spent on alcohol and clothing, a parallel between Smith and Janis Joplin that will be touched upon later.

Beyond her appeal to white audiences, Angela Davis, author of *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* credits Smith (and other black female blues singers of the classic blues generation) with introducing controversial topics into the public consciousness. Davis writes "Bessie Smith recorded numerous songs invoking problems emanating from racism and economic injustice" (Davis 91-92). Specifically, some of these problems include crime, incarceration, alcoholism, homelessness, and impoverishment in the black community (Davis 92). These topics, Davis explains, could not have been broached in a political forum; instead, they were made palatable by the virtue of their musical nature. Davis takes issue with how Smith is regarded by Alberson in his biography of her. In it, he suggests that Bessie could not conceptualize class relations, but rather was thinking solely of race relations, a statement that Davis resents and challenges (Davis 96) Bessie, she believes, was conscious of both dimensions of inequality. To demonstrate this, she looks to the lyrics of *Poor Man's Blues*, often considered the most political of Smith's recorded output. The line "Give the poor man a chance, help

stop these hard, hard times" points to Smith's acknowledgement of class divisions, as does the line "If it wasn't for the poor man, mister rich man, what would you do?" Here Smith clearly displays an understanding of the opposition between these two socio-economic groups. I agree with Davis in her assertion that Smith is not a stranger to class divisions. Another claim Davis hopes to refute is the claim that classic blues artists did not protest social conditions of the day; she again uses "Poor Man's Blues" to discredit "arguments alleging the absence of protest in the blues, and in particular in the classic blues" (Davis 97). Davis further remarks that the simple fact that Smith was able to bring up these topics was unprecedented for someone of her race and gender at this period in time. She compares some of Smith's more controversial lyrical content to Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," a recording that is viewed as an anomaly in Holiday's catalogue for touching upon the sensitive subject of race relations. Author Buzzy Jackson takes a similar perspective on Bessie's contributions to society, writing that she admired how Smith "[used] the blues as a medium for deep truth-telling about what it meant to be a woman" (Jackson xii). In this sense, one can see how Smith was a role model for other women. Though Bessie had a reputation for being a wild party animal, not everyone knew about this aspect of her larger than life persona, and may have still been able to see her as a role model: an empowered black female.

As many distinguished scholars have noted, Smith exemplifies some of the qualities that are most highly valued in a contemporary musician: strength of tone, emotional range and expressiveness, individuality, and a feeling for the subtle nuances that comprise jazz and blues music. Lavay Smith, singer with the Red Hot Skillet Lickers (a jazz and blues group), proclaimed a love for Bessie Smith in her 2001 interview with *JazzTimes*, "I listened to death-rock and Bessie Smith at the same time. I got into jazz at an early age. My dad loved Fats Waller. When I hear Bessie Smith or the Memphis Jazz Band or Billie Holiday, that's my childhood music as well" (Daly). Earlier in the article Daly compares Lavay

to Bessie Smith, citing her "vocal inflections that range from Bessie to Billie" (Daly). One can see in this case how Bessie's vocal inflections, one of the musical skills she was best known for, still influence vocalists today. Johan Fornäs' article on the concept of "otherness" in Sweden's Jazz Age (1920-1950) does not reflect on Smith's musical influence, but rather on her role as a symbol of the blues (and of American music as a whole), of blackness, and of sexuality. He cites a 1948 illustration by Stig Carlson for a poem titled "Blues for Bessie Smith." In the illustration Smith's mouth is pictured enlarged and slightly open, hovering above three Swedish men listening to music at a cafe. To Fornäs, the drawing has "musical and sexual overtones, thus in several ways presented as an all-absorbing fascination" (Fornäs).



(Fornäs)

Smith's influence can be observed outside of the jazz world, too. A famous example of this is in American rock and roll singer Janis Joplin, who cites Smith as a primary influence (LeBlanc 127). She stated that her favorite artists were "Odetta, Leadbelly, and Bessie Smith, and she was greatly influenced by them in her own vocal style" (LeBlanc 127). This fact is clear, as Joplin's style has been compared to Smith, as well (as one might assume.) Before singing in Big Brother and the Holding Company, the group that made her famous, she did not have much experience singing rock and roll; up

until then her focus had been on singing folk music in San Francisco and in other cities on the West Coast. Interestingly, in 1970, Joplin and Juanita Greene (NAACP member whose mother had cleaned Smith's house) purchased an improved tombstone for Smith, who had previously rested at an unmarked grave. This symbolic gesture is important in a number of ways, writes Jana Evans Braziel in her article "'Bye, Bye Baby": Race, Bisexuality, and the Blues in the Music of Bessie Smith and Janis Joplin.'" Furthermore, she explains a number of connections between the two women, musical and extra-musical. Of particular note is Braziel's report on how Smith influenced African American artists in other artistic mediums. Braziel writes about Smith's purported bisexuality (which has been confirmed by Albertson and his sources) and how this inspired gay artists and writers like Langston Hughes and James Baldwin. Braziel's article draws some interesting parallels between Bessie Smith and Janis Joplin, including how both women were from the South and were willing to challenge "social mores and cultural strictures" (Braziel 4) regarding gender and sexuality. This is a rich and interesting topic in itself and fills a full 20 page article.

Smith's life was dramatic even in her death, the result of injuries suffered in a car crash that involved her husband Richard Morgan clipping a large truck. Bessie did not make it to the hospital in time to receive proper treatment for her wounds; it is believed that she might have survived had she made it to the hospital in time. Smith's funeral was attended by 7,000 on Monday, October 4, 1937; 10,000 mourners gathered on October 3, 1937 to pay tribute to her memory. She looked peaceful as well as opulent in the casket, and was dressed in an expensive silk gown provided by her life insurance company, which also provided an expensive silvery metallic coffin and which was lined with gold and whose inside was made of a flesh colored pink fabric which was intended to match her flesh-toned clothing (Albertson 5). This was a fitting tribute to a woman of her stature. Everything about her life was

on a grand scale.

In the same way that humans have evolved so much physiologically and socially over our relatively short history, jazz has, in its even shorter history, evolved startlingly fast. Hearing a record from the early 20th century and one recorded within the last year could lead the casual listener to confusion. What connection is there between Billie Holiday and Cassandra Wilson, or Louis Armstrong and Dave Douglas, or Lester Young and John Zorn, for that matter? Students of the music will recognize that they do all indeed share something: a common root. The jazz that is being made today is informed by the same essential forebears of the art form that Armstrong and Holiday grew up surrounded by. It is truly remarkable how much aesthetic values have changed in the past century. One of these masters is the great Bessie Smith, who not only possessed a powerful and superbly emotive voice, but whose example empowered African American women to free themselves from their subjugated roles in society. Examining the life and music of Bessie Smith gives us a deeper understanding of not only her music, but everything that has happened since then. The importance of understanding the past and its influence on the present can not be overstated. As the word 'evolution' suggests, each phase of jazz's development was informed, made possible, by the step that came before it. I would argue that without Robert Johnson there would be no Charlie Patton, no Patton and no Wes Montgomery, no Wes Montgomery and no Pat Metheny (and so on and so forth.) This paper's aim has been to both teach the reader about Bessie Smith, and to illuminate her place in the lineage of the jazz tradition, so that the reader not only recognizes her importance in musical history, but the general importance of musical heritage to modern music making.

Human beings have the innate tendency to want to create categories as a means of more easily understanding the world around them. These categories make communication more efficient, but in my

opinion, can become problematic when they impede open-minded thinking. This is the opinion of various jazz writers and musicians who find the label "jazz" misleading and confining. Perhaps the controversy over the word jazz is due to what Ian Carr describes as a constant "war" between white and black cultural backgrounds (Friedwald 2). Debate exists regarding whether or not to call Bessie a "jazz" singer exist, but as we have seen, her gift for repetition and variation make her an improviser in the truest sense of the word. Putting aside the constant semantic debates over the words 'jazz' and 'blues,' we can value the aesthetic and societal contributions of the great Bessie Smith. Let's think of her as a blues artist who has influenced jazz musicians to come, because almost in direct response to McBride's tree metaphor is what blues pioneer Willie Dixon famously said, "The Blues are the roots, the rest are the fruits" (Delta Blues). Applying this metaphor to Bessie Smith, let us think of her as one of the deepest roots of American musical culture.

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