

# Negro “Blues” Singers (1926)

## *An Appreciation of Three Coloured Artists Who Excel in an Unusual and Native Medium*

### by Carl Van Vechten

*Editor’s notes—New York is celebrated for its transitory fads. For whole seasons its mood is dominated by one popular figure or another, or by a racial influence. We have had Chaliapin winters, Moscow Art Theatre winters, Jeritza winters, Jazz winters, Russian winters, and Spanish winters. During the current season, indubitably, the Negro is in the ascendancy. Harlem cabarets are more popular than ever. Everybody is trying to dance the Charleston or to sing Spirituals, and volumes of arrangements of these folksongs drop from the press faster than one can keep count of them. Since September, at least four white fiction writers have published novels dealing with the Negro, while several novels and books of poems by coloured writers are announced. Paul Robeson, Florence Mills, Taylor Gordon and Rosamond Johnson, Roland Hayes, and Bill Robinson are all successful on the stage or concert platform. Soon, doubtless, the homely Negro songs of lovesickness known as the Blues, will be better known and appreciated by white audiences.*

A trip to Newark is a career, and so I was forced to rise from the dinner table on Thanksgiving night shortly after eight o’clock if I wished to hear Bessie Smith sing at the Orpheum Theatre in that New Jersey City at a quarter of ten. I rose with eagerness, however, and so did my guests. Bessie Smith, the “Queen of the Blues,” whose records sell into figures that compete with the circulation of the Saturday Evening Post, was to sing in Newark and Bessie Smith, who makes long tours of the South where her rich voice reaches the ears of the race from which she sprang, had not been heard in the vicinity of New York, save through the horn of the phonograph, for over a year.

The signs and tokens were favorable. When we gave directions to the white taxicab driver at Park Place, he demanded, “Going to hear Bessie Smith?” “Yes,” we replied. “No good trying,” he assured us. “You can’t get in. They’ve been hanging on the chandeliers all the week.” Nevertheless, we persevered, spurred on perhaps by a promise on the part of the management that a box would be reserved for us. We arrived, however, to discover that this promise had not been kept. It had been impossible to hold the box; the crowd was too great.

“Day jes’ nacherly eased into dat box,” one of the ushers explained insouciantly. However, Leigh Whipper, the enterprising manager of the theatre, eased them out again.

Once seated, we looked out over a vast sea of happy black faces—two comedians were exchanging jokes on the stage. There was not a mulatto or high yellow visible among these people who were shouting merriment or approval after every ribald line. Where did they all come from? In Harlem the Negroes are many colors, shading to white, but these were all chocolate browns and “blues.” Never before had I seen such an audience save at typical Negro camp-meetings in the far South.

The comedians were off. The lights were lowered. A new placard, reading BESSIE SMITH, appeared in the frames at either side of the proscenium. As the curtain lifted, a jazz band, against a background of plum-coloured hangings, held the full stage. The saxophone began to moan; the drummer tossed his sticks. One was transported involuntarily, inevitably, to a Harlem cabaret. Presently, the band struck up a slower and still more mournful strain. The hangings parted and a great brown woman emerged—she was the size of Fay Templeton in her Weber and Fields days, and she was even garbed similarly, in a rose satin dress, spangled with sequins, which swept away

from her trim ankles. Her face was beautiful, with the rich, ripe beauty of southern darkness, a deep bronze brown, like her bare arms.

She walked slowly to the footlights.

Then, to the accompaniment of the wailing, muted brasses, the monotonous African - beat of the drum, the dromedary glide of the pianist's fingers over the responsive keys, she began her strange rites in a voice full of shoutin' and moanin' and prayin' and sufferin', a wild, rough Ethiopian voice, harsh and volcanic, released between rouged lips and the whitest of teeth, the singer swaying slightly to the rhythm.

“Yo’ treated me wrong;  
I treated yo’ right;  
I wo’k fo’ yo’ full day an’ night.  
Yo’ brag to women  
I was yo’ fool,  
So den I got dose sobbin’ h’ahted Blues.”

And now, inspired partly by the lines, partly by the stumbling strain of the accompaniment, partly by the power and magnetic personality of this elemental conjure woman and her plangent African voice, quivering with pain and passion, which sounded as if it had been developed at the sources of the Nile, the crowd burst into hysterical shrieks of sorrow and lamentation. Amens rent the air. Little nervous giggles, like the shivering of venetian glass, shocked the nerves.

“It’s true I loves yo’, but I won’t take mistreatments any mo’.”

“Dat’s right,” a girl cried out from under our box.

“All I wants is yo’ pitcher in a frame;  
All I wants is yo’ pitcher in a frame; -  
When yo’ gone I kin see yo’ jes’ duh same.”

“Oh, Lawdy! Lawdy!” The girl beneath us shook with convulsive sobbing.

“Use gwine to staht walkin’ cause  
I got a wooden pah o’ shoes;  
Gwine to staht walkin’ cause I got  
a wooden pah o shoes;  
Gwine keep on walkin’ till I lose  
dese sobbin’ h’ahted Blues.”

The singer disappeared, and with her her magic. The spell broken, the audience relaxed and began to chatter. The band played a gayer tune.

Once again, Bessie Smith came out, now clad in a clinging garment fashioned of beads of silver steel. More than ever she was like an African empress, more than ever like a conjure woman.

“I’m gwineter sing dose mean ornery cussed Wo’khouse Blues,” she shouted.

“Everybody’s cryin’ de wo’khouse  
Blues all day  
All ‘long,  
All ‘long.

A deep sigh from the gallery.

“Been wo’kin’ so hard—thirty days  
is long,  
long, long,  
long, long...

The spell once more was weaving its subtle sorcery, the perversely complicated spell of African voodoo, the fragrance of china-berry blossoms, the glimmer of the silver fleece of the cotton field under the full moon, the spell of sorrow: misery, poverty, and the horror of jail.

“I gotta leab heah,  
Cotta git duh nex’ train home..

Way up dere, way up on a long lonesome road;  
Duh wo’khouse ez up on a long lonesome road...

Daddy used ter be mine, but look who’s got him now;  
Daddy used ter be mine, but look who’s got him now;  
Ef yo’ took him keep him, he don’t mean no good nohow.”

## II

If Bessie Smith is crude and primitive, she represents the true folk-spirit of the race. She sings Blues as they are understood and admired by the coloured masses. Of the artists who have communicated the Blues to the more sophisticated Negro and white public, I think Ethel Waters is the best. In fact, to my mind, as an artist, Miss Waters is superior to any other woman stage singer of her race.

She refines her comedy, refines her pathos, refines even her obscenities. She is such an expert mistress of her effects that she is obliged to expend very little effort to get over a line, a song, or even a dance. She is a natural comedienne and not one of the kind that has to work hard. She is not known as a dancer, but she is able, by a single movement of her body to outline for her public the suggestion of an entire dance. In her singing she exercises the same subtle skill. Some of her songs she croons; she never shouts. Her methods are precisely opposed to those of the crude coon shouter, to those of the authentic Blues singer, and yet, not for once, does she lose the veridical Negro atmosphere. Her voice and her gestures are essentially Negro, but they have been thought out and restrained, not prettified, but stylized. Ethel Waters can be languorous or emotional or gay, according to the mood of her song, but she is always the artistic interpreter of the many-talented race of which she is such a conspicuous member.

### III

When we listen to Clara Smith we are vouchsafed another manifestation of the genius of the Negro for touching the heart through music. Like Bessie Smith—they are not sisters despite the fact that once, I believe, they appeared in a sister-act in vaudeville—Clara is a crude purveyor of the pseudo-folksongs of her race. She employs, however, more nuances of expression than Bessie. Her voice flutters agonizingly between tones. Music critics would say that she sings off the key. What she really does, of course, is to sing quarter tones. Thus she is justifiably billed as the “World’s greatest moaner.” She appears to be more of an artist than Bessie, but I suspect that this apparent artistry is spontaneous and uncalculated. As she comes upon the stage through folds of electric blue hangings at the back, she is wrapped in a black evening cloak bordered with white fur. She does not advance, but hesitates, turning her face in profile. The pianist is playing the characteristic strain of the Blues. Clara begins to sing:

“All day long I’m worried;  
All day long I’m blue;  
I’m so awfully lonesome,  
I don’ know what to do;  
So I ask yo’, doctor,  
See if yo’ kin fin’  
Somethin’ in yo’ satchel  
To pacify my min’.

Doctor! Doctor!

(Her tones become poignantly pathetic; tears roll down her cheeks.)

Write me a prescription fo’ duh Blues  
Duh mean ole Blues.”

(Her voice dies away in a mournful wail of pain and she buries her head in the curtains.)

Clara Smith’s tones uncannily take on the colour of the saxophone; again of the clarinet. Her voice is powerful or melancholy, by turn, it tears the blood from one’s heart. One learns from her that the Negro’s cry to a cruel Cupid is as moving and elemental, as is his cry to God, as expressed in the Spirituals.

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