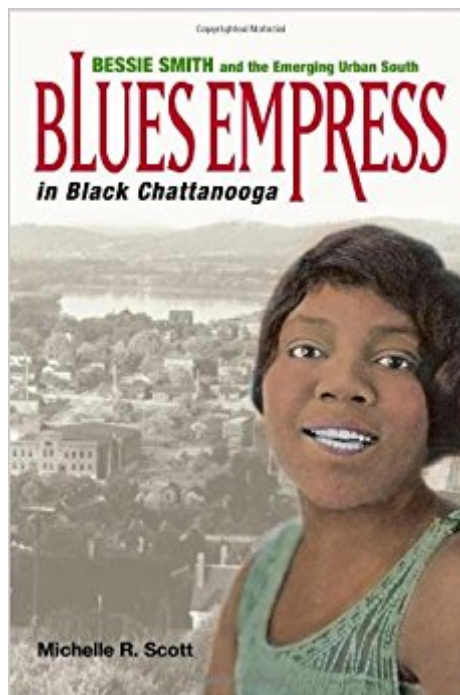




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Blues Empress In Black Chattanooga: Bessie Smith And The Emerging Urban South



Synopsis

As one of the first African American vocalists to be recorded, Bessie Smith is a prominent figure in American popular culture and African American history. Michelle R. Scott uses Smith's life as a lens to investigate broad issues in history, including industrialization, Southern rural to urban migration, black community development in the post-emancipation era, and black working-class gender conventions. Arguing that the rise of blues culture and the success of female blues artists like Bessie Smith are connected to the rapid migration and industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Scott focuses her analysis on Chattanooga, Tennessee, the large industrial and transportation center where Smith was born. This study explores how the expansion of the Southern railroads and the development of iron foundries, steel mills, and sawmills created vast employment opportunities in the postbellum era. Chronicling the growth and development of the African American Chattanooga community, Scott examines the Smith family's migration to Chattanooga and the popular music of black Chattanooga during the first decade of the twentieth century, and culminates by delving into Smith's early years on the vaudeville circuit.

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Customer Reviews

"An interesting, solidly researched, well-organized, well-told contribution to the social history of the blues. . . . Recommended."--Choice
"In this interesting, highly readable, and meticulously documented account, Scott ... crafts a fascinating social history by discussing the post-Civil War growth of the African American community in Chattanooga."
--History: Reviews of New

Books "A richly researched, painstakingly documented glimpse of southern urban life around the turn of the twentieth century."--Journal of American Ethnic History

As one of the first African American vocalists to be recorded, Bessie Smith is a prominent figure in American popular culture and African American history. Michelle R. Scott uses Smith's life as a lens to investigate broad issues in history, including industrialization, Southern rural to urban migration, black community development in the post-emancipation era, and black working-class gender conventions. Arguing that the rise of blues culture and the success of female blues artists like Bessie Smith are connected to the rapid migration and industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Scott focuses her analysis on Chattanooga, Tennessee, the large industrial and transportation center where Smith was born. This study explores how the expansion of the Southern railroads and the development of iron foundries, steel mills, and sawmills created vast employment opportunities in the postbellum era. Chronicling the growth and development of the African American Chattanooga community, Scott examines the Smith family's migration to Chattanooga and the popular music of black Chattanooga during the first decade of the twentieth century, and culminates by delving into Smith's early years on the vaudeville circuit.

This book does a masterful job at discussing the foundation and growth of the Black community in Chattanooga especially charting the circumstances that made African Americans like Bessie Smith's parents migrate there in the 19th century. It is often forgotten that before the migration of Southern Blacks to the cities of the North and the West, there was a migration of rural Black folk to the cities of the South. We get a picture of the New South growth of Chattanooga and how the exploitation of poor Black people was integral to that. What we do not get much of is discussion of African American music and culture, particularly the influences that were expressed in Bessie Smith's music. The author does give some mention of Brass bands in Chattanooga and more mention of Black commercial entertainment that boomed in the late 19th and early 20th Century. However, Scott is chiefly discusses such things and very much else insofar as they reflect business achievement by African American entrepreneurs, rather than expressions of the development of Black theatrical or musical culture. There is almost nothing in this book about Black secular music and nothing about the Blues and its development or the particular blues that Bessie presented. Indeed, the author makes frequent references to other biographies of Bessie Smith where she expects her readers to find out about Bessie Smith's life, music, and culture. This is unfortunate as Smith was a pivotal figure in American culture as a whole. Until her phenomenal success,

outstripping any other Black recording artists dramatically in her first recordings, Blues had largely been performed by vaudeville and minstrel veterans like herself, but whose Blues emulated the sixteen bar Blues of the early 19th century that was adaptations of the Blues to pop music of the time. Smith's singing style was completely in the folk blues style developed in the Black south, reflecting her plebian roots. Her success led to the recording and commercial success of Blacker blues singers like Ma Rainey, who was in fact Smith's mentor, and to the explosion of recordings of Southern Black Blues singers starting with Blind Lemon Jefferson. However, this is a tale that Scott does not wish to tell, enamoured as she is with the achievement of Black business people and the Black middle class, which she vainly attempts to claim Bessie's success was part of. The real question in discussing Bessie is how the basic Down Home Blues broke through in her music and her struggle to be recorded. Still, the book's discussion of the formation of Black Chattanooga and of the business aspects of the Black entertainment industry there are worthy editions to my knowledge and I hope yours.

Since I always loved Bessie Smith and recently saw her biopic, it was just natural that I will eventually read this interesting book that came my way and turned quite a treat. This is not a place to find details from Bessie's life - if you want a definitive biography, it was written long ago by Chris Albertson who even updated it recently and this is last word on a subject, as he interviewed people who are no longer alive and who knew the Empress personally. What Michelle R. Scott did here - and she did it masterfully - she created something along the line of Daphne Duvall and her unforgettable book "Black Pearls" that was all about the world in which these 1920s Blues singers lived. Scott completely focuses on American south (particularly area of Chattanooga) around turn of the century and in great detail describes life conditions of black population, how did they lived, what options in life they had, what exactly was the life of washerwoman (Bessie's mother) like, what was the popular music of the day and how it all influenced young woman who started as a street singer and eventually became highest paid entertainer of her time. To be honest, Bessie is mentioned almost as afterthought - she is present and we get details about her family movements, how they changed the addresses constantly, jobs they did and where exactly Bessie started professionally - but reader can tell author's heart was elsewhere and she wanted to paint greater picture instead. Scott truly enjoys when describing life of black population of now long-lost world the way it was back in the day, at times it feels almost like archeological work because she really digs in old documents and newspapers, starting with aftermath of Civil War and than explaining how urban migration came along, what was the role of the church in this new society, Ku Klux Klan and hostility towards this

newcomers, minstrelsy and new music that came along... Bessie Smith is discussed but more in light of what her early life must have been and what probably shaped her well-known personality. Its all very well written with a hint of all sorts of intelligent perception and understanding of life of poor black woman from the bottom of society in those frankly, dangerous times. Contrary to readers who expected more of Bessie, I found the book absolutely fascinating because it covers overview of the whole society. Brilliant. This is re-reading literature for sure."The durability of a female performer most generally depends on her nerve and her constitution."

Dr. Scott's monograph uses Bessie Smith as an inspirational framework for her inquiry into the experiences of African Americans in the New South during the Nadir. The book is less about Bessie Smith as a person, and more about what shaped the community which, in turn, shaped her. What brought her parents there. What Bessie saw, growing up. The emerging business community of which she became a part. If you want a biography of Bessie Smith, this is not the book for you. Scott is primarily interested in urban black community and how recreational activities were organized, performed, and replicated, particularly within the realm of gender. Some of the early chapters feel rather light on substance, but Scott hits her stride whenever she discusses music. "Life on 'Big Ninth' Street" is an especially engrossing chapter. As part of the scholarly discussion of the music business during the Nadir, this is a worthy addition.

I learned some things from Michelle Scott's bio of songstress Bessie Smith. But I did not learn much about Bessie herself. This is contextual history and most of it pre-dates her short lifespan. I live in Chattanooga and know of many of the locations described. I appreciate the descriptions of the societal and cultural milieu of post Civil War Chattanooga and the book's focus upon African American life. The book is obviously derived from the author's academic research. While sources are well documented, it hampers the readability of the story to be told. There are a few other books available about Bessie Smith and I will probably check them out to find her story. At least I have a greater knowledge of the culture from which she came.

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