

Among the Classic Blues Singers, Clara Smith was second only to Bessie Smith in volume of recorded output - with 122 records.

She was a star – a headliner – packing theaters on the TOBA circuit from New York to New Orleans, and was billed as “Queen of the Moaners” for both her singing style and her sexually explicit lyrics - but very little is known today about the life of Clara Smith.

She kept her personal life personal. She didn’t seem to have the lavish lifestyle nor were there addiction issues that made the papers – or even the back-fence gossip circuit.

She managed to keep her bi-sexuality private, and lived a fiscally responsible existence, while working diligently at her craft.

But a hundred years later - it’s time for the world to get to know Clara Smith.

Like most things about Clara Smith even her date of birth is unclear. She was born in Spartanburg, South Carolina either in 1894 or 1895. The 1900 census - on the other hand - shows her birth date as 1892.

Whatever her birthdate, Smith began her career as a singer and piano player in vaudeville around 1910. By the early 20’s she’d become a TOBA headliner.

TOBA is an acronym for Theater Owners Booking Association.

TOBA - the first black owned and controlled theater circuit began life in 1909 as the Dudley Circuit - founded by comedian Sherman H. Dudley. Another account claims the brothers Fred and Anselmo Barasso founded TOBA in Memphis, Tennessee In 1920.

But there’s some debate about this account.

Meanwhile, in 1916 - Dudley’s circuit had merged with two other circuits becoming the Southern Consolidated Circuit, or S.C.C. in competition with the Barasso brothers - shedding doubt on their account of TOBA’s founding.

Whatever the origins - in 1921 S.C.C. was absorbed by TOBA - with Dudley and his compatriots eventually gaining control.

Between 1921 and 1933 - TOBA became the premiere performance venue for black artists, and had between 80 and 100 theaters at its peak, stretching from the east coast to the Mississippi river.

TOBA theaters were often the only place in the deep south that allowed black artists to perform - at all. It provided a training venue for hundreds of artists including Bessie Smith, Cab Calloway, Count Basie - even Sammy Davis Jr., started out in TOBA.

It wasn't all rosy.

TOBA routinely paid less than its white competitors - the theater facilities were often below standard - and TOBA artists had to pay for their own travel and lodging - making it harder to make a living.

Performers referred to working the circuit as "Toby Time," and the legendary singer Ma Rainey - quipped that TOBA actually stood for "Tough on Black Asses."

It was during Toby Time, that Clara Smith refined her craft. Thanks to TOBA, Smith's comedy skills were honed to a fine point - and she was sometimes billed as "Jolly Clara."

By 1923 though, Smith had left TOBA and moved to New York playing Harlem clubs and speakeasies. There she starred in a show called "Twenty Minutes in Hell," about a man selling his soul to the devil.

In 1924 Smith became the first blues artist to commit "the devil music," theme to lacquer with her recording of "Done Sold My Soul to the Devil."

Clara Smith quickly became a hit in Harlem, starring in several of her own shows including the "Black Bottom Revue" - a "Gay Harlem," themed show. She also ran the "Clara Smith Revue" - "Dream Girls" and "Candied Sweets."

She appears to have debuted on Broadway in a show called "Sweet Chariot," in 1930. And she played some of the biggest vaudeville houses in the nation including the Dream Theater in Columbus, The Booker T. Washington in St Louis, and the Bijou in Nashville.

While touring in the south she met a 13-year-old Josephine Baker and hired her as a dresser - eventually helping her protegee' land a job as a chorus girl.

Baker recalled that Smith would pick out the ugliest man in the audience and sing a love song to him.

Josephine Baker and Smith soon became what was called at the time "lady lovers."

Maude Russell - a performer who worked with Baker described the environment saying -

"Men only wanted what they wanted, they didn't care about pleasing a girl... And girls needed tenderness, so we had girl friendships, the famous lady lovers, but lesbians weren't well accepted in show business... I guess we were bisexual, is what you would call it today."

In her paper "Queer and Moaning" - writer and activist Caitlin Rimmer refers to Clara Smith as

“...a complicated character. She was an outgoing introvert, a bisexual, and a fiscally reserved blues singer with, apparently, none of the alcohol or drug addiction regularly attributed to so many other early female blues singers,” adding that “Smith’s is not the kind of story that can be crammed into the punchy first sentence of LP liner notes.”

Angela Y. Davis in her book “Blues Legacies and Black Feminism,” sheds a different light -

“Sexuality,” Davis tells us, “was one of the most tangible domains in which emancipation was acted upon and through which its meanings were expressed. Sovereignty in sexual matters marked an important divide between life during slavery and life after emancipation.”

It’s hard to imagine today - but before emancipation the reproductive rights of female slaves were often determined by their owners. Making more slaves - created more assets for the plantation. Female slaves were effectively breeding factories. It’s little wonder they rebelled.

The view from the twenty-first century is still complicated.

It’s unclear whether - at the time - it was an active choice of Smith to keep her sexual orientation private - or was it what - Caitlin Rimmer dubbed as “Queer aphasia,” the active separation - or even erasure of gay female life - a brand of homophobia institutionalized by the - often - entitled men who wrote the first history of American music.

While sexuality was an important factor in her life - Clara Smith was a performer.

Looking to compete with the success that Paramount and Okeh developed with their race record divisions - Columbia signed Clara Smith virtually on her arrival in New York.

Joining Columbia in 1923, Smith stayed on the label until 1932, and once she started recording - she didn’t stop - recording 122 sides during her career. Some estimates say it was as high as 151.

One place Clara Smith wasn’t silent about sexuality was in her music. Signing with a major label didn’t change Smith’s subject matter.

Her first record for Columbia seems to sum up her life - public and private. It was aptly titled “I’ve Got Everything A Woman Needs.”

Clara Smith was known for risqué double entendre. Her record “Whip It To A Jelly,” included the lyric - “I wear my skirt up to my knees, and whip that jelly with who I please.”

Smith also recorded a Tampa Red - Thomas Dorsey tune called “Tight Like That,” with virtually the same lyric. “I wear my britches up to my knees - and whip that jelly with who I please.”

In the studio - Smith's voice is electric and has a chameleon quality.

Music historian Carl Van Vechten described her voice to Vanity Fair.

"Clara Smith's tones uncannily take on the color 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."

Recordings are the best evidence we have of Clara Smith's life story. But, how much can we really rely on that? At the time, musicians didn't see much good or bad about making records.

It was a pay check - Not a significant moment in their personal lives.

What little we know about Clara Smith's personal life tells us the On-March 19th, 1926 Clara Smith married a theatrical business owner – and Memphis baseball player - Charles Wesley and the couple had a daughter "Little Willie Lee Smith."

But there's no further evidence regarding Smith's daughter - and it's believed that she separated from her husband and moved to Detroit sometime in the 20s.

Clara Smith worked right up to the end of her life.

She had just returned from a six-month run at Chicago's Orchestra Gardens - when she died February 1st, 1935 - of heart disease. She was only 41.

Clara Smith's buried at Lincoln Memorial Park in Clinton Township, Michigan - about ten miles from Detroit.

Clara Smith – The Founding Mothers Playlist

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/28i88pdY3Hhb02H2iFRL2E?si=b10c5123955d42fd>