

Classic blues is the first genre of American music that we can definitively prove what it was meant to sound like. Because we're lucky enough to have sound recordings.

Before the early twentieth century - the music business was based on sheet music sales - distributed largely through the music departments of department stores like Macy's, Marshall Field's, and dozens of other retail chains across the nation. The notation for popular songs of the day - were sometimes even printed on cigarette packs. Crack open a pack - sit down at the piano and play.

And if you wanted to hear the latest tunes of the day you had to go where they were being performed live - or learn to play them yourself.

The recording industry changed all that in the early twentieth century, and the second person to record a Classic blues record was a founding mother - named Lucille Hegamin.

Born Lucille Nelson in Macon, GA 1894, Hegamin started singing in church choir – then moved to local theaters - and by 15 was touring with the Leonard Harper Minstrels.

After being stranded in Peoria IL - she landed in Chicago where she found work - billed as the Georgia Peach - and sometimes Fanny Baker.

Still performing often as Lucille Nelson – she later told an interviewer that she – “without bragging... made St Louis Blues popular in Chicago” – as one of her feature numbers.

While working in Chicago with Jelly Roll Morton she met another pianist and composer - Bill Hegamin and the pair married in 1914 – or there about.

They moved to Los Angeles around 1918 and Lucille began fronting her own band – the Blue Flame Syncopators – She was billed as the Chicago Cyclone.

The Hegamins returned to New York a year or so later, and Lucille Hegamin became the second African American blues singer to make a record in November of 1920.

In 1921 she recorded “Jazz Me Blues” – a Tom Delaney composition that would go on to become a jazz standard.

Delaney was a sideman for Ethel Waters on her recording of “Down Home Blues” and eventually became Waters manager.

Lucille Hegamin would go on to record for Arto and Paramount in 1922. “Arkansas Blues,” her first true hit – was recorded for Arto - but released on Black Swan.

In Arkansas blues you can hear - virtually note for note - phrases that George Gershwin would use two years later in his legendary composition Rhapsody in Blue.

After recording several tracks, Hegemin returned to singing night clubs.

Like many of the classic blues singers – in their day – they didn't see the future in recorded music. To them it was just a gig – another pay day – as they received a flat fee for recording – with no back-end royalties. Even if they negotiated royalties as part of the deal – it was rare that black artists were actually paid what they were due.

In January of 1922 – Hegemin competed in a blues competition at the Manhattan Casino sponsored by Irene Castle – at the time the most famous woman in America. She finished second to another founding mother - Trixie Smith.

Between 1922 and 1926 Hegemin recorded 40 sides - including "He May Be Your Man (But He Comes to See Me Sometimes)," for Cameo Records who billed her as "The Cameo Girl."

Like many of her contemporaries Hegemin took to the stage touring with the Nobel Sissle Revue "Shuffle Along." Hegemin was in the second of three companies touring the same show. The first company featured Florence Mills in the same role as Hegamin.

Mills – though not considered a classic blues singer – deserves a nod here - for her contribution and impact on all African - American female singers of the era.

Mills – a cabaret singer billed as The Queen of Happiness - would die at age 31, of TB while performing in the hit show Blackbirds - in London – 1927.

It was a huge loss.

10,000 people – including NAACP president James Weldon Johnson – and a who's who of stage, dance and vaudeville - visited the funeral home to pay tribute when the New York Times reported the shocking news of her death. Ethel Waters and Cora Green were honorary pall bearers

Mills life may have been short – but her impact was broad – she was the inspiration for Duke Ellington's composition "Black Beauty," Fat Waller's "Bye Bye Florence" – and British composer Constant Lambert's "Elegaic Blues" – written as a tribute to Florence Mills.

Like Mills, Lucille Hegemin considered herself a cabaret singer – good for all styles – show tunes, pop songs, and the blues.

After her marriage to Bill Hegemin ended in 1923, Lucille began appearing in revue style shows including William's Review at the Lincoln Theater and various others in Atlantic City and New Jersey.

The last records of the early part of her career were for Okeh Records in 1932.

After which, she retired and became a nurse.

Nearly thirty years later, in 1961, Hegemin came out of retirement to record four songs with a band led by Willie the Lion Smith – on the album “Songs We Taught Your Mother,” with Victoria Spivey and Alberta Hunter

A year later she recorded “Basket of Blues” for Spivey Records – a label founded by her friend Victoria Spivey and jazz historian Len Kunstadt. The label operated until 1985 and was the recording home of many of Spivey’s friends including Muddy Waters, Big Joe Williams, Memphis Slim and Louis Armstrong.

Hegemin’s final performance was a benefit for Mamie Smith in 1964.

Hegemin died in Harlem, 1970.

Lucille Hegemin – The Founding Mothers Playlist

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6Lh0D3XBldfAfLqEuAW849?si=04fe32c640a94fa2>