

There were quite a few women named Smith among the classic blues artists – first came Mamie Smith, then Clara Smith - and the best know of all Bessie Smith.

But there's another Smith out there that hardly anyone knows about - her name is Trixie Smith and in the classic blues era she recorded for Black Swan, Silvertone and Paramount often with her band called the Down Home Syncopators.

Then she was largely forgotten – except by collectors.

But Trixie Smith made four dozen records - and gave us a phrase that would forever change American Music.

Because it was her recording of “My Man Rocks Me With One Steady Roll - written by J. Berni Barbour that has the honor of being the first record to refer to rocking and rolling as a secular idiom with sexual overtones – as it would come to be used in the forties and fifties leading to the birth of Rock n Roll.

Trixie Smith was born into a middle-class family in Atlanta, GA sometime between 1885 and 1895.

She attended Selma University - a private HBCU in Alabama, and like so many women of color in the deep south - wishing to escape a life of domestic jobs, sharecropping and Jim Crow abuse - Smith headed to New York to seek her fortune.

By the time she was twenty - she was touring in vaudeville and with minstrel tent shows as a featured singer – billed as the Southern Nightingale.

While Trixie Smith escaped the south, she didn't escape all the abuse. She toured on the TOBA circuit. TOBA - of course - stood for Theater Owners Booking Association – but was colloquially known as an acronym for “tough on black asses.”

Performers - especially lesser known acts - were frequently abused. It was the price they paid to stay employed.

Smith joined Harry Pace's Black Swan records in 1921, where she recorded an original song called “Trixie's Blues.”

A year later she performed it at the Manhattan Casino for a contest sponsored by Irene Castle – the most famous woman in America - and part of the legendary dance team - that gave us the fox trot and introduced the Memphis Blues to white America - kicking off the blues genre.

Smith and her tune “Trixie's Blues,” won the silver cup for first prize - beating out among others - Lucille Hegamin.

Between 1921 and 1926 Trixie Smith recorded nearly 40 records. She also recorded under the names Tessie Ames and Bessie Lee - for other labels including Silvertone.

She was accompanied by the best musicians of her day - among them were - James P. Johnson, Fletcher Henderson, Don Redman, Charlie Dixon, Freddie Keppard, Louis Armstrong and Charlie Green.

The last recordings in the early part of her career - were for Paramount in 1926.

When her career began to wane - Trixie Smith like many other Classic blues singers turned to the theater - reportedly under the name Bessie Lee – though no record of an artist using that name can be found at the time.

There are records for a Trixie Smith between 1914 - 1916 including a spot in the chorus of Irving Berlin's "Watch Your Step." Whether this is the same Trixie Smith is unclear. It's possible there was already an actress using that name which led Smith to adopt the nom de plume Bessie Lee.

What is clear is in 1928 Smith appeared in "The Girl Next Door," at the Lincoln Theater in Harlem.

The Lincoln Theater, provided a stepping stone - and between 1931 and 1940 Trixie Smith appeared under her own name in at least five Broadway shows - among them - DuBose Heyward's "Brass Ankle," and Mae West's "Constant Sinner."

Smith toured with Mae West after the Broadway show closed and appeared in at least one Mae West film - "The Black King."

In all Trixie Smith appeared in five movies - "Birthright," "God's Step Children," "Drums of Voodoo," "The Black King," and "Swing."

"Swing," is an interesting film. It was directed by legendary filmmaker Oscar Micheaux - a pioneer of indie film, and the first African American to produce a feature film - "Homesteader," in 1919. Micheaux was also the first African American to make a feature length sound film - "The Exile," in 1931.

His films defied expectations - portraying black Americans as more than the stereotypical - servant and chauffeur characters - as was common in the studio films at the time. Micheaux films also - advocated for integrated communities.

Micheaux made "Swing, in 1938.

And Trixie Smith was cast as Lucy - a supporting role - in the backstage musical story of a woman who leaves her cheating husband and becomes a Broadway star.

After a stint in Hollywood Trixie Smith returned to the recording studio under the direction of music historian and patron John Hammond - where she recorded some of her best known works – including a remake of an earlier track “Freight Train Blues.” She also recut “Trixie’s Blues,” - with Sidney Bechet, Charlie Shavers and Sammy Price as sidemen.

In December of 1939 she was featured in John Hammond’s production of “From Spirituals to Swing,” at Carnegie Hall.

And though few people - outside of collectors - know her music today - most of us have heard her music. Trixie Smith’s recording of “Railroad Blues,” is in the film “Fried Green Tomatoes,” and several of her songs comprise the soundtrack - of Woody Allen’s film “Blue Jasmine,” from 2013. And, her song “Jack I’m Mellow,” was used as the theme song for a 2017 Netflix sitcom “Disjointed,” starring Kathy Bates.

One thing that likely hampered the legacy of Trixie Smith was the fact that she died young.

She was only 48 when she died on September 21st, 1943.

But Trixie Smith is definitely worth another listen.

TRIXIE SMITH – THE FOUNDING MOTHERS PLAYLIST

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0mPTpBVjgYletEH74pV9eL?si=b0fcdfbda42941d1>