

It was 1920 - and the head of Okeh Records - Fred Hager - a white executive - finally agreed to let Perry Bradford - an African American record producer - to do a test recording with Sophie Tucker - a legendary Broadway singer - who sometimes sang the blues.

The plan was for Tucker - who was white - to record Bradford's song "That Thing Called Love," as a test to see if the public was even interested in the music - before the label invested in a release by Mamie Smith - a black nightclub and Vaudeville singer from New York.

Sophie Tucker was a huge star - and at the time - Hager and Okeh records - saw her as a safer investment.

She was also under contract to Vocalion Records - which meant Tucker was contractually unable to do the recording.

Reluctantly Fred Hager agreed to let Mamie Smith record and release - "That Thing Called Love."

It was the beginning of a musical epoch, yet today very few people know who Mamie Smith was.

Mamie Smith was born Mamie Robinson in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1891. She began touring as a performer at age ten with a group called the "Four Dancing Mitchells."

Later she joined "The Smart Set," a road company revue produced by the legendary Tutt brothers. But when the Smart Set got to Harlem, Smith decided to leave the tour and pursue local work in night clubs.

A few years after Smith began making her mark on the New York club scene, Perry Bradford produced a musical revue called "Made In Harlem," and Mamie Smith joined the cast. Bradford was impressed with her voice, and began working to get Smith a record deal.

It was a tough road - no black singer had yet recorded black music.

In fact, Harry Pace - the legendary - W.C. Handy's Music Publishing partner - was convinced that the major labels were actively preventing black artists from recording.

And Bradford's experience - further proved what Pace believed.

Okeh Records - and - Fred Hager, got letters from angry whites threatening to boycott the label if they recorded black artists. But that didn't deter Bradford. He went to several major record companies trying to get Smith a deal.

He tried Columbia with no luck.

He tried Victor who brought Smith in to do a test of "That Thing Called Love," but it went nowhere.

Bradford – true to his nickname "Mule," tried again with Okeh Records, but was continuously blocked by Fred Hager's secretary. And it was a chance meeting between Bradford and a couple of songwriters Chris Smith and Bill Tracy that finally opened the door.

Tracy had written a major success for Bert Williams – the first black man to play a leading role on Broadway. Smith and Tracy told Bradford - to tell Hager - that they sent him.

The name drop worked. The moment Hager heard Tracy's name he let Bradford in for a pitch meeting.

The crux of Bradford's pitch was the idea that white record execs were missing out on a huge and – untapped market.

There were fourteen million black Americans who would buy this music in an instant. And if the music was as good as Bradford envisioned – white audiences would buy it too.

The final thrust of Bradford's pitch pointed out that - by being first - Hager would have the entire market to himself - at least for a while. That got Hager's attention. He finally agreed to record Smith – in spite of the threatening letters.

On Valentine's Day 1920 Mamie Smith recorded "That Thing Called Love," backed by the all-white Okeh Records house band.

In spite of all of Bradford's work - Okeh Records didn't much believe in the project. The 78 RPM recording debuted with no publicity or promotion - at all.

But Bradford had been right - and the record surprised the label with above average sales. All of it from word of mouth.

And that success prompted Hager agreed to do another session this time with black musicians.

Scheduled to be recorded on August 10th, 1920, were "It's Right Here For You," and a tune called "Harlem Blues," pulled from Bradford and Smith's "Made In Harlem," revue.

But right before the session, Bradford had an epiphany. He reworked "Harlem Blues," complete with a new title - and "Crazy Blues," was born.

"Crazy Blues," a record with a black singer - backed by black musicians - written by a black composer and producer - had finally arrived.

Bradford - the composer - structured the song similar to the way W.C. Handy had done "St Louis Blues," which had a 12 bar refrain and a 16 bar tango style B section. "Crazy Blues," flipped that - with a 16 bar verse - and a 12 bar chorus, creating a combination of traditional blues and pop music from the time.

"Crazy Blues," was a huge hit. It sold 75,000 units the first month, half a million the first six months - some estimates claimed sales were over a million copies.

No one had expected this kind of success from a largely unknown black artist.

The record also confirmed Perry Bradford's pitch to Fred Hager.

While most of the record buying audience for "Crazy Blues," was black - young white people began to buy it too.

Today "Crazy Blues," is widely considered to be the first blues record. But is there really any way to definitively claim anything as 'the first' of its kind?

Morton Harvey a white singer had recorded a version of "Memphis Blues," in 1915 with an unfortunate lyric written George A. Norton. Handy had written the song as an instrumental.

W.C. Handy's own band had recorded several instrumental versions of the tune in 1917, but the sessions were considered a disappointment.

"Memphis Blues," as a song had taken the country by storm as the basis for the latest dance craze - the Fox Trot - popularized by Vernon and Irene Castle.

Their music director James Reese Europe - and his all black Hellfighters band recorded several tracks for Pathe' just before James Europe's murder in 1919. The sessions included "St Louis Blues," "Memphis Blues," and "Hesitating Blues," all by Handy and all straight up legitimate blues tunes.

For that matter Mamie Smith herself recorded - "That Thing Called Love," six months before "Crazy Blues." But is "That Thing Called Love," really a blues song - or simply a pop tune performed by a black artist?

It doesn't matter if "Crazy Blues," was or wasn't truly the first blues record.

Because it was, the first successful blues record by a black artist, performing black music, backed by black musicians - and that success brought the world a new genre of music.

With "Crazy Blues," the unfortunately named - "Race Record" genre was born - along with it - "The Jazz Age."

When modern audiences listen to “Crazy Blues,” they’re more likely to hear something resembling 1920’s jazz than what we think of as blues today. Mamie Smith was primarily a Vaudeville singer. No matter what we hear - her success opened the door for hundreds of other African American artists.

Suddenly every label was clamoring to record black music.

It even spurred W.C.Handy’s publishing partner - Harry Pace - to sell his stake in the partnership and begin Black Swan Records, the first black owned label in the country - a label Pace knew wouldn’t boycott black artists.

Mamie Smith quickly became known as “Queen of the Blues.”

She was one of the first artist to embrace radio – especially to build her white audience - and she suddenly found herself very wealthy - buying three houses in New York.

Perry Bradford put together a band for Smith called “The Jazz Hounds,” and the act began touring.

Over the years The Jazz Hounds roster included Johnny Dunn, king of the New York Trumpeters - Bubber Miley - who’s wah wah trumpet technique would later help create the Duke Ellington sound, and a seventeen-year-old saxophonist named Coleman Hawkins, the man credited with making the sax a jazz horn.

Mamie Smith’s background in Vaudeville made her show one of the most entertaining acts in the country, with singing, dancing, comedy - even a trapeze act. Her show was considered one of the most family friendly. Unlike many black singers of the era - Smith rarely went blue.

Over the next decade - nearly every other Classic Blues singer borrowed from Smith’s stage show.

In 1929 Smith made an appearance in “Jailhouse Blues,” a short musical from Columbia Motion Pictures. But that was the apex of her career. Like the rest of the Classic Blues singers - the tours dried up with the great depression.

Mamie Smith died – reportedly penniless - in 1946, and was buried without a headstone. A campaign to get her a grave marker finally succeeded in 2014.

"Crazy Blues" is in the Grammy Hall of Fame, and on the National Recording Registry of the Library of Congress.

The Library of Congress had the film elements of “Jailhouse Blues, for years, but there was no sound track until 2009 – when a complete disc was discovered in Australia.

More than any other achievement though - Mamie Smith and "Crazy Blues," created a path for Alberta Hunter, Ethel Waters, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and dozens more - all of whom began their recording careers within a few years of "Crazy Blues."

It's also worth remembering that "Crazy Blues," had a B side "It's Right Here For You."

If you want to hear more from Mamie Smith - check out Blues Alley - The Founding Mothers - Mamie Smith Playlist - on Spotify.

I know it's a mouthful - so there's a link in the episode notes.

Blues Alley - The Founding Mothers - Mamie Smith Playlist

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1bJ3NWoVhvqHRQKsDY426e?si=1148da0ccd8d4f60>

FIND

JAILHOUSE BLUES clip

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7uoCD1ef6Y>