

harlem is... MUSIC

The Blues

Tradition

Harlem Blues

During the first week of February 1923, Bessie Smith arrived in Harlem with her companion Jack Gee. They stayed with his mother on 132nd Street between Lenox and Fifth Ave. Through her appearances in tent shows throughout the South the young singer had established herself as an important up and coming artist. She'd also appeared in theaters on the TOBA circuit in cities such as Chicago and Philadelphia. However, Smith had not yet gained a foothold in New York. On this trip, she walked the streets of Harlem, sat in with musicians at local clubs such as the Nest Club and other venues. Her style was a bit slow for the Harlem ear, but her talent was evident. Later in the month she would record one of her first major hits, "Down Hearted Blues."

Within five years of that first recording session, Bessie Smith was a national superstar and a Harlem favorite. She joined a bevy of black classic blues queens who would come to define the genre for Harlem and for the record buying public. Ethel Waters, Clara Smith, Mamie Smith, Bessie Smith and Alberta Hunter brought glamour and show biz sophistication to the blues and their images and voices came to represent the a newer, more sophisticated, urban sensibility that fit in perfectly with Harlem of the 1920s. For writers like Langston Hughes the Classic Blues women

would represent the modernist spirit and energy of Harlem far more than the prose and poetics of the Renaissance writers.

The blues queens weren't the only ones to communicate a blues sensibility to Harlem audiences. While Duke Ellington conducted a blues based jazz orchestra at the Cotton Club, where he entertained white audiences, Harlemites partied to hard driving blues based pianos at rent parties throughout the 30s. Bessie immortalized the Harlem house party in her hit Gimme a Pigfoot and a Bottle of beer:

"Up in Harlem every Saturday night
When the highbrows get together
its just so right"

These parties were incubators for new forms of music and dance and certainly helped to birth both Harlem Stride Piano and boogie-woogie. Prior to the migration of thousands of Southern blacks New York's black music shared much more with ragtime than the blues, but the migrants brought their blues with them and in so doing they transformed the soundscape of Harlem; in turn, Harlem transformed them and their musical taste.

By the end of the 1930s, Harlem witnessed the rise of a new blues queen, one who would be equally adept at singing the American Songbook as well as dark, dramatic torch

songs. Her name was Billie Holiday, Lady Day. While she rarely sang formal blues, when she did, she imbued them with a sense of witty hipness that came to define the genre for a generation of young urban sophisticates. With hits such as "Billie's Blues" and "Fine and Mellow", she kept her feet firmly planted in the blues tradition. Holiday inspired generations of singers across race and genre. One who was most influenced by her would embody the new spirit of the blues as it transitioned into rhythm and blues and she too would adopt Harlem as her home; Dinah Washington made her Harlem debut at the age of 18 with the Lionel Hampton band in 1943. In her hit "Evil Gal Blues", she sang:

I got men to the east
I got men to the west
But my men down in Harlem always
Love me the best

Throughout the twentieth century, Harlem continued to produce and nurture singers and musicians who contributed to the blues tradition by providing that uniquely modern sensibility that Harlem brings to the world.

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