

Singing the Blues

Have you ever felt sad or lonely? Have you ever felt like singing about your troubles when you were sad? A lot of early Americans, particularly slaves, often felt this way because of the bad situations in which they found themselves. They believed an important part of dealing with those feelings was sharing them. They did so through songs that can be traced directly to their African musical heritage. Music in African culture is an extremely important part of life. In African tribes, people sing songs as they do their work throughout the day. They learn songs about different aspects of life. They learn specific songs about family life, their family history, the traditions of their tribe, and even songs for specific daily chores. They also created songs and music for special events. When Africans were brought to America and forced into slavery, they brought this heritage with them.

While they worked in the fields, slaves would sing songs to help them do the work and to help them feel better about their situations. When they were not working, they would sing melancholy songs in their homes or in religious gatherings. These songs were about the hardships of being a slave, the difficulties of losing their family, and the sadness of being separated from the ones they loved. Often they would petition God to help them in these difficult times in their lives. This, therefore, is the origin of what we now call the *blues*. The slaves continued to create these songs until they were freed at the end of the Civil War. Even after they were freed, the songs and the style remained popular.

By about 1900 the blues had developed into a standard musical form of about 12 measures that would be repeated for all the words in the song. There were basically two periods of this more organized form of the blues. One began toward the end of the nineteenth century and ran to approximately 1930, and the other began in 1930 and continues to the present time. The earlier period is usually divided into two basic styles: one is country or rural blues, and the other is city or urban blues. The main difference between the two styles is that the city blues was more rhythmic and often faster than the country blues. Also, the city blues performers were often accompanied by a complete jazz combo or rhythm section, consisting of a piano, bass, and drums, with other instruments such as trumpet, clarinet, and trombone. The country blues singers usually accompanied themselves on the guitar. Some of the best-known country blues singers of the early period were Big Bill Broonzy, Robert Johnson, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Teddy Ledbetter (also known as Ledbelly), and Lightnin' Hopkins. The most famous urban blues singers were women. The most important names from that era were Ma Rainey, Mamie Smith, and the most famous of all, Bessie Smith.

The second period, beginning in 1930, is divided between singers and instrumentalists. The singers include artists such as Joe Turner, Jimmy Rushing, Joe Williams, and Jimmy Witherspoon. The instrumentalists, many of whom also sang, were the great Louis Armstrong, Jack Teagarden, and Ray Charles.



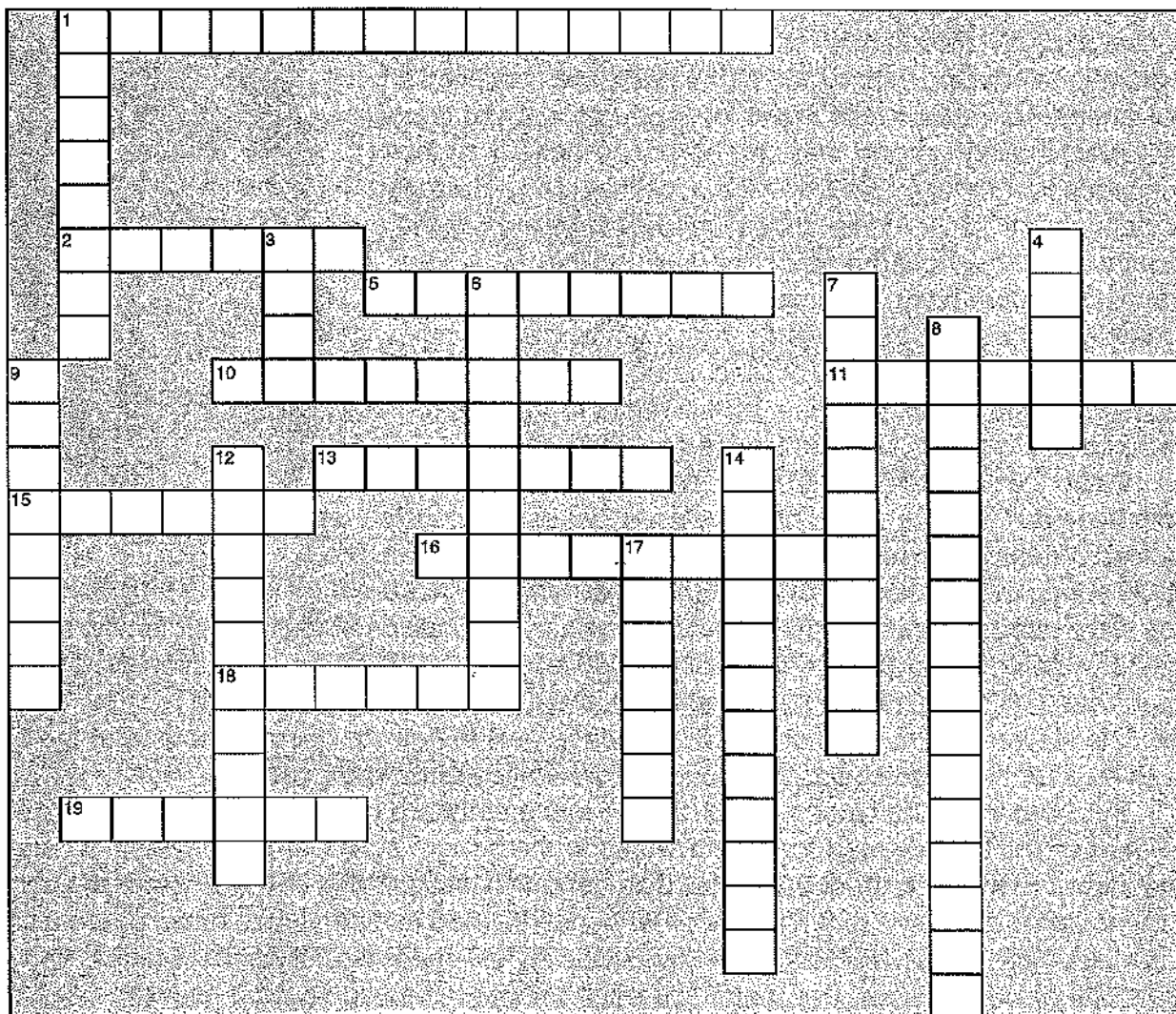
Bessie Smith



Name: _____ Date: _____

Those Puzzling Facts

Use the clues below to complete the crossword puzzle. Answers may be found in the narrative on the blues.



ACROSS

1. One of the great blues instrumentalists (two words)
2. What you sometimes feel when you are all by yourself
5. Another word for ask
10. The Africans who were brought to America brought this with them.
11. What you may feel like doing when you are sad
13. The more organized form of the blues had two of these.
15. The earlier period of blues is divided into two basic _____
16. These were more rhythmic (two words).
18. Tribal members learn songs about specific daily _____
19. The slaves would sing songs while working in these.

DOWN

1. Teddy Ledbetter's nickname
3. Songs teach members of African tribes about the different aspects of this.
4. This is extremely important in African culture.
6. Africans learn specific songs about the _____ of their tribe.
7. The most famous urban or city blues singer (two words).
8. People who play instruments are called _____.
9. The blues developed into a standard musical form consisting of 12 of these.
12. This type of song was sung in homes or at religious gatherings.
14. The singers of this style accompanied themselves on guitar (two words).
17. Big Bill _____