

Bessie! The Life of Bessie Smith

CLARENCE: Who you thinks listening to Bessie's music? I give you one clue. Radio set costs 135, 140 dollars. How long a black man gonna work to save for something like that?

Look here, I've carried this quite a spell. The Preston News (*Reads*) 1924. "Few white homes here are without her records. A prominent white music dealer told this reporter of the Preston News that Bessie Smith's records actually outsell everything in this year's catalogue." That's right. Better than Ma Rainey or Ethel Waters. Fanny Brice. Al Jolson. Black, white, she's topping them all.

And to think back 8-9 years ago, those Uppity Northern Coloreds didn't want nothing to do with us. My Daddy's Daddy a slave. His granddaddy a slave before. After my daddy was freed, he took up preaching and he run a Baptist mission. In the South. Chattanooga, Tennessee. Me and Bessie, we children - are the first in our family born free. But you see, now we got new kindsa slavery. Other ways you can wear chains. Chains you can't even see.

When Bessie first got hooked up with Columbia Records, she made 29 sides for those people. 29 sides and they didn't pay her not one penny of royalties. Bessie Smith pulled that company clean outta bankruptcy. And that's how they paid her back. Cheating her outta what's rightfully hers.

Bessie Smith. Empress of the Blues. She earned that title. She earned that right.