

CULTURAL COMMENTARY

‘Crazy Blues’ Transformed American Music

Recorded 100 years ago this week, singer Mamie Smith’s blues track—the first both sung and accompanied by Black artists—made the music industry take note of the power and potential of Black performers and audiences.

by John Edward Hasse

Published originally in The Wall Street Journal, Aug. 11, 2020

Occasionally, a recording comes out and effects a fundamental, historic change. In the case of Mamie Smith, her *Crazy Blues*, recorded 100 years ago this week, sparked a transformation of the music industry and the American soundscape. In 1920, Black people accounted for nearly 10% of the U.S. population, but they and their music had been largely locked out of the record business. Record companies chose white bands to make the first jazz recordings. In fact, the industry dominated by Columbia and Victor—issued mostly music by white people for white people.

Crazy Blues was not the first record by a Black group: Vocal quartets made recordings as early as 1890. Nor was it the first blues on record: W.C. Handy and James Reese Europe recorded blues instrumentals in the late 1910s. But it was the first recording of blues sung and accompanied by Black musicians.

Nobody knew it at the time, but Smith’s recording would open a door to the future, enabling Black people to hear their own songs whenever they wanted. And white people to hear them, too. *Crazy Blues* became one of the most consequential recordings in American history, sparking a revolution that continues to resound.

Originally a Southern folk expression, the blues remained largely unknown to white Americans until they were notated and commercialized by the Black bandleader and composer W.C. Handy, beginning in 1912 with his *Memphis Blues*.



Other musicians began publishing blues, among them the Black songwriter and producer Perry Bradford. He coaxed the scrappy, upstart Okeh Records to engage Black vaudeville and cabaret singer Mamie Smith into recording several of his songs. In February, Okeh took a risk and brought in Smith to record with a white band. The disc sold well enough for a return session, including *Crazy Blues*, that August—with an all-Black group. The performers stood in front of a large megaphone-like horn; electric recording and microphones, with much better fidelity, wouldn't arrive until 1925.

The song mixes 16-bar stanzas with 12-bar blues. While the trombone smears notes behind her, Smith belts the lyrics with authority and swagger. She laments her man leaving her:

Now I got the crazy blues
Since my baby went away.
I ain't had no time to lose,
I must find him today.

Bradford's lyrics also include the line "get myself a gun and shoot myself a cop." Perhaps Okeh thought it was just jive, but it can be read as coded protest, coming on the heels of the "Red Summer" of 1919, when white rioters killed unarmed Black civilians in many cities and Claude McKay responded with his self-assertive sonnet "If We Must Die."

Crazy Blues became a smash success. "To say that the Atlanta colored population has gone 'crazy' about this record would be putting it mildly," reported a trade paper in February 1921. "Your correspondent has never in many years' experience known a hit to 'go over' so big." The sales were astonishing, especially considering the price of \$1, equivalent to \$13 in 2020.

In a 1969 interview, Black songwriter Noble Sissle recalled the reaction soon after *Crazy Blues* was issued in October 1920: "I was in Baltimore; it was wintertime. And this record just came out. And a fella in a cigar store put a phonograph [in the doorway] and pointed the record out the door, so people could hear it. . . . And come the sound of that record, and people run right over and said, 'Give me that.' Because they'd been waiting for that sound so long."

Not all Black people approved of the blues and jazz; some considered them disreputable and sinful. But others found blues moving, cathartic, even spiritual.

The disc's sales shook up the industry. Record companies suddenly realized that a wealth of heretofore unrecorded material existed among African-Americans, and that Black people eager to hear their own music again and again constituted a previously untapped market. A boom in recording such blueswomen as "Ma" Rainey and Bessie

Smith (no relation) ensued. Record companies adopted the name “race records”—a respectful term at the time—to market blues, jazz and gospel music to Black consumers, though some curious white music lovers caught on, too.

After *Crazy Blues*, record companies sought new material and markets, sending talent scouts to remote, mostly Southern, locations to immortalize all sorts of local and regional musicians. These included Black performers (Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charley Patton), white (Fiddlin’ John Carson, Jimmie Rodgers), Native (Big Chief Henry’s Indian String Band), and Tejano (Lydia Mendoza). The record companies also accelerated their recording of ethnic musicians—German, Italian, Polish and the like—for niche markets, while folklorists such as John Lomax went into the field to save early 20th-century musicianship from disappearing.

The surprise hit *Crazy Blues* diversified how America sounded to itself. By the end of the 1920s, a decade of rapid musical change, the limited spectrum of American music captured on recordings would widen into a radiant rainbow, fulfilling Walt Whitman’s lyrical line literally: “I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear.”

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