



“Empress of the Blues”

Reading Comprehension – Informational Passages

Directions: Read the passage. Then answer questions about the passage below.

Bessie Smith was the “Empress of the Blues.” But long before she earned that title, she and her brother Andrew performed on the streets of Chattanooga, Tennessee. They came from an **impoverished** family, so they needed to earn money for their household. He danced, and she sang. The two often performed in front of the White Elephant Saloon, a tavern in the city’s African–American community.

In 1912, Bessie Smith met Gertrude “Ma” Rainey (known as the “Mother of the Blues.”) Smith joined Ma’s vaudeville act and became a popular Blues singer. In the 1920s, Bessie Smith **starred** in the Broadway musical *How Come?* In 1923, she made her first record, “Gulf Coast Blues” and “Down Hearted Blues.” It sold 800,000 copies. She made records with some of the most famous Jazz musicians of that **era**, including James P. Johnson, Coleman Hawkins, and Louis Armstrong. One of her most famous recordings was “St. Louis Blues,” recorded in 1929 with Louis Armstrong. She was the highest paid black singer of that time. She made 160 records. But the Depression in the 1930s was not good for her **career**. Columbia Records dropped her in the 1930s. She died in 1937.

Today Bessie Smith is still remembered as the “Empress of the Blues.” Bessie Smith was **admitted** into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1989.

Questions:

1) What was Bessie Smith called?

- A. “Ma”
- B. “Ma Blue”
- C. “Mother of the Blues.”
- D. “Empress of the Blues.”

2) Bessie and Andrew Smith performed...

- A. in the White Elephant Saloon.
- B. in Chattanooga, Tennessee.
- C. on Broadway.
- D. in a tavern.

3) When did Smith make her first record?

- A. 1912
- B. 1920
- C. 1923
- D. 1929

4) Smith recorded “St. Louis Blues” with...

- A. Louis Armstrong
- B. James P. Johnson
- C. Coleman Hawkins
- D. None of the above

5) Which company did Smith record for?

- A. White Elephant
- B. Broadway
- C. Columbia
- D. None of the above

Vocabulary:

1) **Impoverished** means...

- A. very poor.
- B. very humble.
- C. very talented.
- D. very important.

2) Another way to say **starred** is...

- A. was a central part of.
- B. was in control of.
- C. directed.
- D. negotiated.

3) An **era** is...

- A. a recording.
- B. a sound.
- C. a period of time.
- D. a group of songs.



4) What is a **career**?

- A. Lifelong work
- B. Part-time job
- C. Health
- D. Voice

5) Another way to say **admitted** is...

- A. enrolled.
- B. registered.
- C. allowed in.
- D. All of the above