



## Sings Bessie Smith

LaVern Baker

180g

Speakers Corner/Atlantic SD 1281

LaVern Baker? Bessie Smith? When was the last time you've seen a review of or about either of these artists? Smith died in 1937 and only the most intrepid of record collectors still listen to any of her recordings. These rather primitive recordings were reissued as 10" 78 RPMs in 1940 and later compiled as LPs when vinyl discs took off. While the energy comes through to support the claim Smith was the greatest female blues singer ever, they are far from high fidelity. Baker was a Rhythm & Blues singer in the early 1960s and her singles output made her name and fame (especially 'Tweedle Dee' and 'Jim Dandy'). Baker's style would seem to have little to do with the Bessie Smith's style. However, once you drop the stylus on this record, you are hooked and the sound is to die for. But first the back-story about how this R & B star paid tribute to the Empress of the Blues.

Baker, whose albums were released between 1956 and 1970, was a pioneer of the transition from the blues to rock n' roll. Her handful of LPs show a powerful voice that transitioned from romantic blues to gospel to early blues-rock, she followed Aretha Franklin into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as the second female inductee in 1991. And her single with Jackie Wilson, 'Think Twice' with lyrics that precluded airplay, is probably the "dirtiest" song of the last half of the twentieth century.

Bessie Smith started out as a street busker, became a dancer with a traveling vaudeville troupe, graduated to chorus line performance and snagged a recording contract with Columbia in 1923 at the age of 37. She was a woman of rough edges, open about her bisexuality, working class instincts, and her feelings about rampant racial injustice. She became the highest paid black entertainer of her day and was backed by jazz royalty, including Louis Armstrong and Coleman Hawkins. She died in an automobile accident in 1937 along Highway 61. Her grave remained unmarked until 1970 when a tombstone, paid for in part by Janis Joplin, was erected.

When you first hear Baker animating Bessie Smith's favourite music, Joplin's debt to Smith becomes obvious. Smith's work is part of a corpus of powerful black female singers who helped pave the way for female entertainers whose popularity crosses racial barriers without incident.

Baker performs these songs associated with Smith with a group of jazz all stars, recorded in 1958 for Atlantic. Buck Clayton's trumpet is ever present, but the band top to bottom is composed of great talent. Vic Dickenson, Jimmy Cleveland, and Urbie Green are on trombone; and Paul Quinichette, Sahib Shihab, and Jerome Richardson make up the sax section. You get the picture. Even if you can't remember Bessie Smith or LaVern Baker, the songs will be familiar to almost anyone, including 'Gimme A Pigfoot', 'Empty Bed Blues'

and 'Nobody knows You When You're Down And Out.' The delivery by Baker is explosive, as it should be with Bessie Smith material. The music swings like crazy and Baker can change tempos without catching her breath. The blues suited Baker and this is easily her best album, strong from beginning to end.

And then there is the sound, which immediately grabs your attention. Speakers Corner has been reissuing numerous titles from the Atlantic vaults, and they are well mastered and consistently better sounding than the original releases. Few Atlantic titles are audiophile quality, but they are way above average, and Kevin Gray's mastering of the reissues has caused us to re-evaluate just how good the Atlantic catalogue sounds.

This title is among the best sounding of all the Speakers Corner Atlantic releases. A 1958 Tom Dowd stereo recording, it sounds more like what we expected from Columbia in the late 1950s. The soundstage is spread out evenly across your listening room. This in stark contrast to reissues of Coltrane and Ornette Coleman titles reissued in stereo and marred by the pan-potted sound and gaping holes between images in each speaker and dead centre. What wouldn't you give to hear *My Favorite Things* and *The Shape Of Jazz To Come* reissued without a potted stereo soundstage? **DD**

**RECORDING**  
**MUSIC**

