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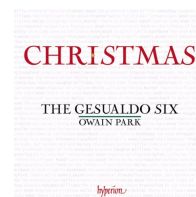


## La Vern Baker Sings Bessie Smith - Speakers Corner

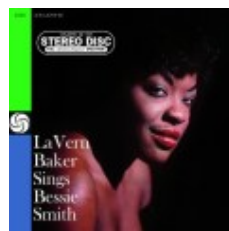
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by Audiophile Audition | Dec 13, 2019 | [Jazz CD Reviews](#), [SACD & Other Hi-Res Reviews](#) | 0 comments

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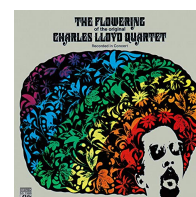


### La Vern Baker Sings Bessie Smith - Atlantic Records 1281 (1958)/Speakers Corner records (2018) 180-gram stereo vinyl, 41:46 \*\*\*\*\*:



Bessie Smith was known as the *Empress Of The Blues*. Her unique grittiness defined her vocal style, but at times held back with her

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recording career. This rumbling *contralto* made her stand out and she was eventually signed to Columbia Records. Her repertoire touched on various elements of blues narratives with forceful socio-political contexts like poverty, race relations and sexuality. Despite her untimely death, Smith became the most celebrated female blues vocalist of all time. She collaborated with James P. Johnson, Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet and Fletcher Henderson. Smith is credited with being a major influence on Billie Holiday, Aretha Franklin and Janis Joplin.

In 1958, R & B singer La Vern Baker had broken through with singles like "Tweedle Dee" and "Jim Dandy" off her sophomore album. Her next endeavor would be ambitious, a tribute to the legendary Bessie Smith. *La Vern Baker Sings Bessie Smith*. Backed by an all-star "big" band (Buck Clayton, Urbie Green, Paul Quinichette, Vic Dickenson), Baker exhibits the technical and powerful vocals that would eventually culminate in her selection as only the second female solo artist (behind Aretha Franklin) to be inducted into *The Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame*. More importantly, the availability of a 1958 state-of-the-art recording studio provides a fresh crisp aural landscape. Unfortunately Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey were never able to access this level of technology. Speakers Corner Records has released a re-mastered 180-gram vinyl of *La Vern Baker Sings Bessie Smith*. From the opening strains of "Gimme A Pigfoot", it is apparent that meticulous large ensemble arrangements are the order of the day. Baker's saucy interpretation include anecdotal humor ("Check all your razors and your gun!") that underscores Smith's independent attitude. Buck Clayton adds a nimble solo on trumpet. "Baby Doll" is simmering and nasty. Baker's singing is visceral. Switching to up tempo, "On Revival Day" feels like gospel meets jump swing. Paul Quinichette (tenor saxophone), Sahih Shihah (baritone saxophone) and Vic Dickenson (trombone) provide a fluid complement to Baker's earthiness. As with all of the tracks, the talented studio musicians execute polished arrangements. On "Money Blues", Baker converts an often desperate blues lament to a medium-swing comic take. Her "Daddy I need money, now!" petition is terrific. Baker channels Bessie Smith's fierce independence in the anthemic, "I Ain't Gonna Play No Second Fiddle" with her own brand of toughness. Punctuated stops, Buck Clayton and a vamp chorus make this one unforgettable. A Bessie Smith original, "Back Water Blues" distills more traditional structure with repeat verse lines and a stride-inspired piano (Nat Pierce). Baker simply becomes the soul of these songs.

Side Two continues to embrace a contemporary representation of blues. "Empty Bed Blues" has slow-burning intensity. Baker's sultry voice is matched by Clayton's trumpet. Like all blues music, there is a familiarity that enhances the accessibility. A certain highlight is a pair of



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1920's *Americana* numbers. The celebratory "There'll Be A Hot Time In The Old Town Tonight" was a big hit for Smith in 1927. This Dixieland cover is muscular with a horn chorus that includes baritone saxophone. Trumpet and tenor saxophone runs are featured. There is no greater musical symbol of The Great Depression than "Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out". Described as "Vaudeville Blues", this moderate tempo standard may be Bessie Smith's cultural touchstone. Baker's performance is brilliant with a smooth delivery and subtle vocal manipulations. Her rhythmic elocution is impressive and Clayton's muted trumpet fits perfectly. "After You're Gone" is a staple of early 20th Century popular music, notably covered by Smith and Sophie Tucker. On this version, a mid-song transition to swing mode resonates. The last two songs are both Smith originals and explore a woman's perspective ("Young Woman's Blues") and search for identity ("Preaching The Blues").

*La Vern Baker Sings Bessie Smith* is a wonderful tribute to an American icon. It works because Baker is as gifted a singer as her idol. Speakers Corner Records has done an outstanding job on this 180-gram vinyl. Baker's phenomenal voice is captured with vibrancy. Both the rawness and mellower tonality shine through. The instrumental texture of the large ensemble is mixed with precision and sounds expansive.

#### **Performing Artists:**

La Vern Baker - vocals; Buck Clayton - trumpet; Vic Dickenson - trombone; Paul Quinichette - tenor saxophone; Sahib Shihah - baritone saxophone; Nat Pierce - piano; Danny Barker - guitar; Wendell Marshall - bass; Joe Marshall - drums; Jimmy Cleveland - trombone; Urbie Green - trombone; Jerome Richardson - baritone saxophone

#### **TrackList:**

##### *Side One:*

Gimme A Pigfoot

Baby Doll

On Revival Day

Money Blues

I Ain't Gonna Play No Second Fiddle

Back Water Blues

##### *Side Two:*

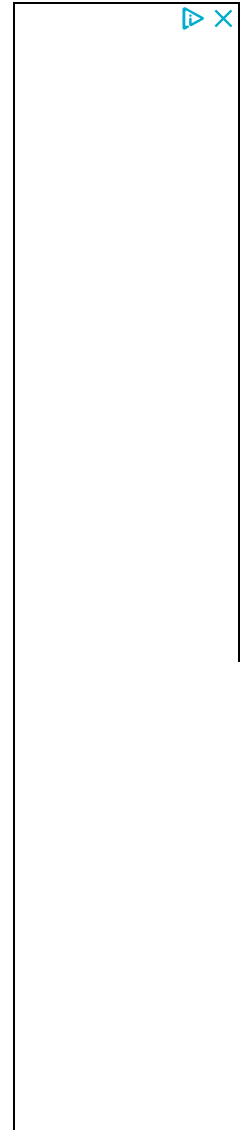
Empty Bed Blues

There'll Be A Hot Time In The Old Town Tonight

Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out

After You've Gone

Young Woman's Blues



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