

St. louis blues assignment



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

For my listening assignment, I chose the piece, "SST. Louis Blues" by Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong, recorded in the late sass. At this time, the country was in the transition from country blues (a single artist accompanied by a single guitar) to city blues (a single artist accompanied by either a piano and/or several instruments). In city blues, the form was based on a very rigid 12-bar blues structure, which used mainly the I, IV, and IV chords in similar progressions each time through.

Lyrics were typically sophisticated, dwelling on themes of love, and typically sung by women in a refined manner. "SST. Louis Blues" is in the style of city blues. It had a rather slow tempo and more sophisticated lyrics than country blues. The instrumentation (a solo cornet, Piano and single artist) was somewhat avant-garde for the time. There was a narrow range to the melody. The melody was simple and refined. The scale type was the blues scale, which fuses a major and minor scale together.

The motives were not even one assure long but repeated every verse. The melody was more diatonic and had less motives with larger intervals. Harmony was not present in the song and all harmonic rules were followed. The rhythms were simple, with no layered effects. However, in the cornet solos, the player (Louis Armstrong) would play improvised riffs in reaction to what the artist (Bessie Smith) was singing in the line preceding his solo, providing an interesting texture to the song. Another interesting aspect of the song is the texture.

Since it was made in the late sass's, the recording equipment wasn't as sophisticated as it is today, so the clicks, scratches and hisses are present in

the recording. Regarding dynamics, the song did not have much dynamic contrast. The piece had only one dynamic, and it was a comfortable mezzo forte throughout. The improvisation in this song really made the song great because it added so much more flavor and style to the piece. It mingled very nicely and expertly with Besides melody lines.

Louis also plays some riffs based on what lyrics were being said before his solos, which played to the audience's linings more than just a melody. The slower tempo is unique to the city blues because of the lyrics of the songs. Some songs were about lost lovers in which the song would not be a fast one, or about enduring prejudices about race, which would make for a slower tempo. The lyrics of this song are of love; the verses were carefully constructed to fit the form and rhythm. This music was primarily used for functional music, or something that was more in the background for other events.

That music was used primarily in vaudeville and minstrel shows, but eventually was incorporated into a 17-minute movie entitled, *SST. Louis Blues*, which starred Bessie Smith. This started an entirely new way of representing music in movies. The African-Americans lived a hard life in America, and the hardships they endured were present in the lyrics they sang in the blues. This had an enormous effect on the way music was played also. As stated above, the slower tempo was due to the somewhat depressing mood of the songs; many of the songs from that time era were not very fast.

The 12-bar blues structure is something that is easy to follow so even people who enjoyed listening to music but had no formal training could keep up with where the song was going. In the article about Bessie Smith (McGill: The Blues,) Bessie was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee between 1894 and 1898. Bessie had a very rough childhood. Her father died when she was very young and her mother died when she was nine along with two brothers. Bessie started performing on street corners at the age of nine to help support her family, was a professional at 18, landed a record contract ND sold 780, 000 copies within six months.

She was sponsored by Columbia records and received her bookings from an agency handling black artists called the Theater Owners' Booking Association (TUBA.) By the late sass's, her popularity started to level off and then decline with the closure of her record deal. She started a smooth transition into the more swing version of Jazz but died before she had a chance to develop in that field. The richness and power of her voice led legendary John Hammond to say that Bessie Smith was the greatest artist American Jazz ever produced.