

“Crazy Blues”

Artist: Mamie Smith (1883–1946)

Music / Lyrics: Perry Bradford

Label: Okeh (1920)

The first recordings of classic, urban “blues” were made in 1920, when vaudeville singer/songwriter Perry “Mule” Bradford convinced the Okeh label to record Mamie Smith, who was the star of a musical revue called *Maid of Harlem*, singing some of his tunes. Bradford backed up Smith with a band, the Jazz Hounds. The result: “Crazy Blues” was a blockbuster hit, demonstrating that the African American listening audience was an untapped market for the recording industry. This inspired Okeh

(and other labels) to produce more recordings of African American artists, which were called “race records.”

Mamie Smith’s singing style actually owes more to theater and vaudeville than it does to blues. Her stage show with the Jazz Hounds was a theatrical extravaganza, and like vaudeville, incorporated dance, humorous skits, and other nonmusical entertainment.

Musical Style Notes

A blues song generally consists of a certain number of measures, or *bars* (see sidebar). Each verse of the song generally contains this same number of measures. There are 16-bar blues, 8-bar blues, and—the most common—12-bar blues. “Crazy Blues” is in fact a “crazy blues,” with the verses alternating between a 16-bar and a 12-bar structure (see road map below) in an unpredictable pattern.

As the name of Smith’s band suggests, the instrumentation (cornet, trombone, violin, piano) is much more commonly associated with jazz, and the style of simultaneous improvisation employed by the players gives the piece a “ragtime” feel that places the piece squarely in the late 1910s and early 1920s.

Music Terminology Demystified: What Is a “Bar”?

Most types of western music feature a repeated succession of rhythmic pulses, or “beats.” By placing emphasis on certain beats in a recurrent pattern, we can group these beats into rhythmic “units.” There can be units of 2 (like a march), 3 (like a waltz), 4 (like many rock and blues styles), or even more. One of these rhythmic units is called a “measure” or, in idiomatic American music terminology, a “bar.”

Musical “Road Map”

TIMINGS	COMMENTS	LYRICS
0:0–0:09	Introduction (4 bars) Instrumental entrance, featuring simultaneous improvisation and “sliding” instrumental attacks characteristic of a ragtime style.	
0:10–0:45	First verse (16 bars) Notice the way in which the trombone “walks” the bass notes (descending down the musical scale in stepwise motion), both during the verse and in playing transitions from one verse to another.	<i>I can’t sleep at night . . .</i>
0:46–1:13	Second verse (12 bars)	<i>There’s a change in the ocean . . .</i>
1:14–1:48	Third verse (16 bars)	<i>Now I’ve got the crazy blues . . .</i>
1:49–2:15	Fourth verse (12 bars) Notice how the bass instruments begin to double the singer’s melody at the beginning of this verse.	<i>Now I can read his letter . . .</i>
2:16–2:40	Fifth verse (12 bars)	<i>I went to the railroad . . .</i>
2:41–3:13	Sixth verse (16 bars)	<i>Now I’ve got the crazy blues . . .</i>
3:14	“Tag” at the end	<i>. . . Those blues.</i>