Blues songs about insects such as bees, hornets, boll weevils, and mosquitoes are fascinating for their references to the actual insects, as well as for their use of insects as metaphors for other, often disturbing aspects of African American life in the first third of the twentieth century. One such song was Walter E. Lewis’ “Mean Old Bed Bug Blues.”

Lewis was born in Greenwood, Mississippi on 6 March 1893. After seven years, he moved with his family to Memphis, Tennessee, which he would call home for the rest of his life. As a child, his friends called him “Furry,” and the nickname stuck. Shortly after arriving in Memphis, Lewis learned the guitar from a middle-aged man he later referred to only as “Blind Joe.” At the young age of fifteen, Lewis was playing for the public on street corners, in bars, and at private parties.

A stint with W.C. Handy’s Orchestra led to several years of him playing on the road. In 1917, Lewis lost a leg in a railroad accident and returned to Memphis to play solo and with various small blues combos. He quit touring in 1922 when he took a steady job as a street sweeper for the City of Memphis.

Lewis stayed active in music even though he had said goodbye to the road. In April and October 1927, he recorded his first eleven records, known as “sides,” in Chicago for the Vocalion label. Then he recorded for the Victor label in Memphis before recording for Vocalion again in 1929. Even though some of his records, like “Kassie Jones,” are now considered blues and folk classics, none of his records sold well.

Among the songs he cut in 1927 was “Mean Old Bed Bug Blues,” a traditional 12-bar blues song with humorous lyrics and a run time of just two minutes and forty-three seconds. On some of the record labels for the song, the songwriter is credited as Leo Wood, although it is unclear if he wrote the music, lyrics, or both. Once thing is clear, though: Lewis recorded the most distinctive version of the song with only his guitar to accompany his singing. He plays the guitar on the song in a light, lilting manner and delivers the lyrics in a no-nonsense style with his strong singing voice.

Other musicians played and recorded “Mean Old Bed Bug Blues,” also titled “Mean Old Bedbug Blues” on some recordings. Other artists of the era to record it were Lonnie Johnson, Lizzie...
Miles, Betty Gray, Kitty Walters, Bobby Leecan and Robert Cooksey, and Fats Waller with Jack Bland and His Rhythm-makers. Later recordings were from Lightnin’ Slim, Earnest Tubb, Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, Dave Van Ronk, and Suzy and Eric Thompson.

However, the best known recording of the song was by Bessie Smith on 27 September 1927, in which she was accompanied only by a guitar and piano. Many versions of the song, especially those recorded by blues women, can be traced directly to Smith’s version, which was three minutes, eleven seconds long.

Smith was a major star in her time and popular with both black and white audiences. Her huge voice and larger-than-life personality earned her the title “Empress of the Blues.” She was born on 15 April 1894 in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and lived an amazing (though short) life that has been well chronicled. Hers was a life filled with high adventure that included heavy drinking, brawling with men and women, and bisexual escapades.

Smith’s parents died when she was very young and she and her siblings raised themselves in desperately poor circumstances. She sang and danced for spare change on the streets of her hometown before leaving in 1912 to join a vaudeville troupe. Her strong voice and the surprising popularity of recorded blues music (also known as “race records”) in the early 1920s led to her recording contract. She recorded 160 sides for Columbia Records from 1923 to 1933. Her records and live performances made her the highest-paid African American entertainer of her day.

Although her lyrics are very similar to Lewis’, Smith’s version is more clearly a double-entendre affair: the bed bug is a metaphor for men with less than noble intentions toward women. The sexual imagery is palpable and far from subtle.

The lyricist and the singers and musicians of the era who performed the song probably had firsthand experiences with Fig. 2. Photograph of Bessie Smith.  

**Bessie Smith’s Lyrics to “Mean Old Bed Bug Blues”**

Gals, bed bugs sure is evil, they don’t mean me no good  
Yeah, bed bugs sure is evil, they don’t mean me no good  
Thinks he’s a woodpecker and I’m a chunk of wood.

When I lay down at night, I wonder how can a poor gal sleep  
When I lay down at night, I wonder how can a poor gal sleep  
When some is holding my hand, others eating my feet.

Bed bug as big as a jackass, will bite you and stand and grin  
Bed bug as big as a jackass, will bite you and stand and grin  
Will drink all the bed bug poison, turn around, and bite you again.

Something moan in the corner, I went over and see  
Something moan in the corner, I went over and see  
It was the bed bug a prayin’ “Lord, gimme some more to eat!”

Got myself a wishbone, bed bugs done got my goat  
Got myself a wishbone, wish they’d cut their own doggone throats.
bed bugs and therefore had the motivation to sing passionately about them. As is the case now, they were difficult to get rid of once they found their way into a dwelling. Until the use of DDT in the mid-1940s, control methods such as oil sprays, pyrethrum sprays, and sulfur dioxide fumigations were ineffective.

Furry Lewis continued working for the City of Memphis until he retired in 1966. He never gave up music, though, and was part of the blues revival movement of the 1960s. He was recorded several times in the 1960s and early 1970s, and participated in an eclectic mix of activities before he died, including opening twice in concert for The Rolling Stones, playing on The Tonight Show, being featured in Playboy magazine, and appearing in the Burt Reynolds movie W.W. and the Dixie Dancekings. In 1976, Joni Mitchell wrote and recorded a song about him, “Furry Sings the Blues,” that was hardly flattering to Lewis. He gradually lost his eyesight and contracted pneumonia in 1981. He died from heart failure on 14 September 1981.

The Great Depression greatly curtailed Bessie Smith’s career, but she continued to work until she died from injuries caused by an automobile accident near Clarksdale, Mississippi, on 26 September 1937. She was 43. She is recognized today as a member of an elite group of the truly great singers of the twentieth century, and her influence can be heard in many vocalists that have come since.

With the resurgence of bed bugs and renewed attention to them, the song “Mean Old Bed Bug Blues” causes us to pause and reflect on how these insects were perceived nearly ninety years ago. Life in the United States is very different now than it was in 1927, but the bed bugs are still with us.

Discography


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