

## IDA COX

1886 - 1967

### Uncrowned Queen of the Blues

With an independent spirit and impassioned determination, singer-songwriter Ida Cox did more than just sing the blues – she made us look at ourselves and our culture with new eyes. Ida was a strong-willed black woman struggling in a white man's world. Armed with her intelligence and sharp edged wit, she brought to light common issues through a black woman's point of view. Although not a 'belter' like so many of the Classic Blues singers, Ida Cox was able to convey so much pure feeling with her strong, sure style and phrasing.

Born Ida Prather in Toccoa, Georgia, Ida was the daughter of poor sharecroppers, not much different than millions of other black children growing up in the south at the turn of the century. Without much to hope for in the way of jobs or education, a bleak future seemed fairly inescapable.

Ida's love of music began at a very young age when she began singing gospel music at her church choir. It was obvious from the beginning when she opened up her mouth and sang – folks definitely took notice. She was simply born to sing the blues.

Barely in her teens, she started working the southern tent and vaudeville circuit. She was often put on stage in blackface or given the role of "Topsy", a demeaning role typical of these venues.

By age fourteen, she landed her first professional singing job with F.S Wolcott's *Rabbit Foot Minstrel Revue*, which also launched the careers of Bessie Smith and Ida's idol, Ma Rainey. Ida's sharp wit enabled her to earn a living as a comedienne with the troupe when she was not scheduled to sing, and with this came valuable stage experience. In the early '20s, she performed with Jelly Roll Morton, the flamboyant diamond toothed jazz pianist who touted himself as "the man who invented jazz" and with Joe "King" Oliver.

With her bluesy voice, commanding stage presence and physical beauty, she was recognized as one of the premiere solo acts offered by the shows that traveled the Theatre Owners' Booking Association (TOBA) circuit. She worked shows up and down the East Coast and into the Midwest, in the middle. In March of 1922 her performance at Beale Street Palace of Memphis, was aired on WMC Radio, leading to a wider audience and positive reviews.

After the tremendous success of Mamie Smith's 1920 recording of "**Crazy Blues**", record companies realized there was a demand for recordings of "race records". It was in 1923, during a stint at the rundown Monogram Theater in Chicago, that J. Mayo Williams, a talent scout for Paramount, caught Ida's performance. Williams had been looking for a singer who could hold an audience without being aided by sets, dancing and costumes. For this reason he frequented the Monogram, because it could not afford to hire an elaborate act. Lovie Austin, the pit pianist at the Monogram, often gave Williams tips on who to watch out for.

Ida's hard, clear voice and blunt cynical lyrics awed Williams. He described her as a woman who just "stood flat-footed and sang". Williams invited Ida and Lovie Austin to record at Paramount. Together they recorded "**Any Woman's Blues**", "**Bama Bound Blues**", and "**Lovin' is the Thing I'm Wild About.**" With only Lovie's piano and Ida's voice on the tracks, it was clear from the very start that Ida possessed the raw talent necessary to be a successful recording artist. Ida secured a recording contract with Paramount just a few short months before her idol, Ma Rainey.

Paramount quickly became a major blues label with Ida Cox in the forefront. She was often billed as the "Sepia Mae West" or the "Uncrowned Queen of the Blues". From 1923 to 1929, Ida recorded almost eighty sides for Paramount as well as Broadway and Silverstone companies. Most of her songs were originals.

Ida's records proved to be steady sellers. Her songs particularly spoke to black women who longed for dignity and respect, especially from the men in their lives. Some of her best songs included "**Death Letter Blues**," "**Chicago Monkey Man Blues**" and "**Wild Women Don't Have the Blues**" that fearlessly touched upon sexual freedom with a powerful, self-determination that still feels new today. She had a larger-than-life stage presence and was often decked out in a tiara, a cape and a rhinestone wand. Performing with swaggering conviction and confidence, Ida symbolized the liberated black female that was evolving in the 20's.

Some of her other popular compositions were "**Pink Slip Blues**", a bold statement touching on the limited work opportunities for blacks, and "**Last Mile Blues**" which spoke plainly about the shameful issue of lynching, an all too common occurrence in the 1920's. .

As well as breaking barriers with her musical style, Ida was a very astute businesswoman. In 1920, she formed, managed and produced her own traveling vaudeville troupe, appropriately called *Raisin' Cain*, which proved to be so popular it became the first show associated with (TOBA) to open at the famed Apollo Theater in

New York. Because of her savvy business sense she was able to continue working during the Great Depression, long after other Classic Blues singers of the 20's were forced to quit. *Raisin' Cain* stayed afloat well into the next decade despite the hard economic times. Still, after ten years, changes on the musical scene provided difficult times for Ida and her show.

In 1934 Cox and Bessie Smith appeared together in the musical revue *Fan Waves* at the Apollo Theatre. In 1938 she performed regularly at the Cafe Society nightclub in New York City. This decade of performing was highlighted by an appearance at Carnegie Hall in John Hammond's *From Spirituals to Swing*, a series of concerts in 1938 that brought mainstream recognition and respect to black music. It was here that Ida performed an unforgettable version of her original "Four Day Creep", composed with her husband and pianist, Jesse Crump

Suddenly a modern jazz audience 'discovered' Ida Cox. Following the concert (in which she was backed by Lester Young), she recorded with a number of jazz artists, including guitarist Charlie Christian, vibraphonist Lionel Hampton, band leader Fletcher Henderson, and singer-trumpeter Hot Lips Page. Although the careers of other classic female blues singers had expired, Ida continued to perform well into the 1940's. In 1945 Ida suffered a debilitating stroke and was forced to retire. She moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, and lived out the next fifteen years with her daughter, Helen, believing her show business days were over, singing in her local church.

In 1959 legendary producer John Hammond, who had not forgotten the power of Ida's blues, placed an ad in *Variety* in search of Ida Cox. Hammond coaxed her to return to the recording studio and in 1961 she recorded her final album, "*Blues for Rampart Street*" with the Coleman Hawkins Quintet. At 65 years old, she had lost some of her control of range and pitch, but she never lost the gutsy confidence and bold delivery of her songs.

Ida suffered another stroke in 1965, and in 1967 she entered East Tennessee Baptist Hospital in Knoxville, where she died of cancer on November 10. The music world lost a true gem. She is buried in Longview Cemetery in Knoxville.

Ida's recordings conveyed remarkable emotion and feeling. On stage she exuded a glamorous sophistication and confidence that captivated her fans; yet she never veered from the powerful center of the song. Her independent spirit blazed the trail for many blues singers and had a particular influence on Koko Taylor, Etta James, and Tina Turner. She was a pioneer, a new model for black women of the time, and frankly, a role model for all women. She carried herself in such a manner that even when she

sang her off-color lyrics of her vaudeville-influenced songs, she was perceived as no less a lady, no less the Queen of the Blues.

**Sources:**

***Blues Singers: Biographies of 50 Legendary Artists of the Early 20th Century***, David Dicaire, McFarland & Company Publishers, Inc., 1999

***Spreadin' Rhythm Around: Black Popular Songwriters, 1880-1930***, David A. Jasen, Gordon Gene Jones, Routledge, 2005

***Nothing But the Blues: The Music and the Musicians***, Edited by Lawrence Cohn Abbeville Publishing Group, New York, 1993

[www.redhotjazz.com/idacox.html](http://www.redhotjazz.com/idacox.html)

[www.aaregistry.com](http://www.aaregistry.com) (a wonderful educational resource, The African American Registry)

**Suggested Listening:**

**“Blues For Rampart Street: Ida Cox with the Coleman Hawkins Quintet”** - (with Roy Eldridge, Sammy Price, Milt Hinton, Jo Jones) Concord Jazz Label, 1961  
Recorded late in her life, what she’s lost in terms of range is more than made up by her spirit, and the way we finally get to hear her unhampered by pre 1940 recording techniques.

**“From Spirituals to Swing: 1938 & 1939 Carnegie Hall Concerts”** - re-mastered 1999 (only two of these tracks are from Ida Cox) this is a must have for jazz and blues fans everywhere

**“Ida Cox: Complete Recorded Works, Vol. 4, 1927-1938”** import (available again after a long absence from Amazon)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZyUFxp1zDRk> a great clip of Ida singing “Four Day Creep” with ex-husband and pianist Jessie Crump. I love how she sings from the belly of her voice, full, straight, right to the point.



PAMELA ROSE

*Wild Women of Song*