

Arts & ENTERTAINMENT



Queen Latifah speaks about her role as the legendary blues singer Bessie Smith in the HBO Films drama, "Bessie," debuting sometime this spring. (AP photo)

Schooled for Film Role

Queen Latifah to portray legendary singer

(AP) - When Queen Latifah was approached 20 years ago to play Bessie Smith, she had to do some research.

"I was Queen Latifah the rapper. I had no idea who Bessie Smith was," the singer-actress told the Television Critics Association on Thursday.

Since then, she's been thoroughly schooled in the life and talent of the legendary blues singer, whom Latifah, 44, finally gets to portray in the HBO film "Bessie."

Her music "may be almost 100 years old, but it has a

power a lot of artists could learn from today," Latifah said. Smith herself would be a success if she were a contemporary artist, Latifah said of the singer who died in 1937 at age 43.

"Bessie," whose cast includes Mo'Nique, Michael Kenneth Williams, Khandi Alexander, Mike Epps and Charles S. Dutton, will air this spring. A date was not announced.

The film was directed and co-written by Dee Rees and includes among its producers Lili Fini Zanuck and Richard D. Zanuck, who first brought the idea of a Smith film to Latifah. Richard Zanuck died in 2012.



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