

Blues Alley EP 3
"Cathedrals of Commercialism"

by
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The Renaissance Tower - a twenty-five story - high rise apartment building, now stands at the corner of Main Street and Jefferson - in Memphis Tennessee.

It's represents what urban renewal, in most American cities is all about, demolishing unwanted properties, and building something more profitable in their place.

But what do we lose in that process? And, what does that location Main Street and Jefferson in Memphis Tennessee, have to do with the birth of Blues and American music?

We'll tell you what we discovered, this time on Blues Alley!

Episode 3 - Cathedrals of Commercialism

When we think of all the places synonymous with the business of buying and selling American music - New York's, Tin Pan Alley, Nashville's Music Row or Hollywood's Sunset Strip - no one ever includes the corner of Main and Jefferson in Memphis, Tennessee - as one of those locations.

But, the first commercial transaction - that sparked a revolution and began the rise of American Music as we know it today - took place at the corner of - Main Street and Jefferson Avenue - on September 28, 1912.

In a department store.

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The Renaissance Tower - originally called 99 Tower Place Apartments - was built in 1968 - and occupies the place where Bry's Department store stood in 1912.

The city directory, that year, listed Bry's address simply as - Main and Jefferson - northwest corner.

It was all the address they needed - everybody in town knew Bry's.

In those days - department stores had an profound impact on the culture and economy of everyday life.

Everyone - even children - got dressed up in a coat and tie to go shopping at the department store well into the 1960s.

The Department Store was an event - it was entertainment.

Arriving on the scene in the mid eighteen hundreds, department stores were built to be cathedrals of commercialism.

They functioned in their heyday - much the way Amazon does today. A single place - where you could just browse - at your leisure - for a what appeared to be an endless variety of products.

They helped introduce the latest fashions and customs - as well as innovations like household appliances, the phonograph, radio, washing machines, television, and in the 1970s the VCR.

Most even delivered directly to your door.

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Department stores altered the face of the American workforce by becoming one of the first industries to employ women. And they changed society at large - by offering - an acceptable place for females to go - unaccompanied by a man.

As ridiculous as it sounds today - in the nineteenth century - unaccompanied women in public were viewed as prostitutes.

But those Victorian era mores were changing with the new century.

And all of this female independence - came along at exactly the same time as Women's suffrage.

Department stores became the political arena for the movement - and many - recognizing that the vast majority of their customers were female - became active supporters, allowing suffragette meetings in their tea rooms and public gathering spaces. They'd have been fools not to.

Department stores also helped make several American cities world famous destinations.

Marshall Field's State Street store was still the most visited destination in Chicago into the first decade of twenty first century - and Macy's legendary store on 34th in New York - was for a time - the largest building in the U.S. with over a million square feet.

They really did have more in common with cathedrals than they do with the big box stores we know today.

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Department stores were designed as social gathering spots - with stunning architecture - most had restaurants, barber shops, beauty parlors, and tea rooms.

Entertainment was a center piece of many Department stores - hiring string quartets, and concert pianists to provide background music.

Wannamakers in Philly - had an enormous pipe organ in the lobby - and once brought in the legendary German composer Richard Strauss for a series of performances.

Department stores also had music counters where they sold all kinds of instruments, - violins, pianos, trumpets, and eventually records. In 1912 though - song sales were centered on sheet music.

In those days if you wanted to hear the latest tunes at home you had to play them yourself, or know someone who could.

Music downloads were still nearly a century in the future.

Recorded music of any sort - was more of a - novelty than an industry.

Record sales in 1900 totaled about four million units - *or about a third of what Adele's album 21 sold by it's self a hundred and twelve years later.*

Sheet music on the other hand was big business - releasing as many as 25,000 titles a year - some selling a million copies or more.

And sheet music was about to become a big player in the birth of the blues. Because that was the business W.C.

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Handy was entering into when he decided to sell copies of his song Mister Crump - at Bry's Department Store in 1912.

We tend to think of the blues as the beginnings of American music, because it was the first American art form to gain international acclaim.

But of course, there had been other music published in America before 1912. John Phillip Sousa, Stephen Foster and Scott Joplin were all prolific composers in the 19th century.

Joplin - the father of Ragtime - was a trailblazer of black American music creating the most popular genre of the 1800s. Even W.C. Handy originally classified his music as rags.

In the Ragtime era though, music was still based in the European tradition - the Major and Minor scales that had been the predominant tonality of western music since Bach.

It was Handy's song - Mister Crump - that first acquainted main stream music with the blue note - those flatted third and seventh scale degrees, and the tritone - that chromatic note between the fourth and fifth steps of the scale.

In traditional tonality those notes were considered dissonant and unacceptable. Even mistakes. But Handy moved them to the forefront.

He was the first to try and write down, what he described as the slurs and note bending of the African American voice.

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It was Memphians who first heard this new tonality in American music with the debut of Handy's campaign song for Ed Crump in 1909 - and it was an instant hit!

Between 1910 and 1912 - Mister Crump was the Handy band's most requested song everywhere they played.

But the song presented Handy with a couple of problems.

First - the shelf life of a campaign song is usually just that - the campaign. Once the race is over - win or lose - the song loses its value pretty quickly.

And even worse for Handy the lyric telling Mister Crump - now the mayor of Memphis - to go get "hissself" some air... was a little awkward - to say the least.

Regardless Handy had a hit on his hands. He now had to figure out how to capitalize on it, beyond having it requested at gigs?

In the summer of 1912 - A man named L Z Phillips - who managed the music counter at Bry's Department store agreed to carry the sheet music of Mister Crump - if Handy would pay for the printing.

So Handy arranged the tune - for piano, without the lyric, and Mister Crump became the subtitle of The Memphis Blues.

The day Handy met with Phillips about selling the sheet music of Memphis Blues at Bry's music counter, he was introduced to a Denver music publisher named Theron C Bennett. Bennett offered Handy national distribution on the spot.

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It was just the opportunity he'd been looking for.

So at a time when school teachers made about forty bucks a month, Handy invested \$32.50 plus a dollar for the copyright registration to have his piano arrangement printed.

Music printing was an old business, existing since shortly after the invention of moveable type. But, it was a business that Handy was unfamiliar with so he asked Bennett to make the deal on his behalf.

The two men agreed to contract Otto Zimmerman and Sons Music Printers in Cincinnati to do the plating and printing for one thousand copies of Memphis Blues.

It would turn out to be a fateful decision.

On Friday - the 27th of September - the thousand copies of Memphis Blues arrived, and went on sale - at the music counter at Bry's Department Store - the next day - Saturday September 28th.

Handy took his final three dollars and put an ad in Sunday's paper.

The ad - titled "Mister Crump The Celebrated Rag Has Arrived," is sandwiched between promos for Junior and Misses Serge Dresses, and Children's coats.

It prominently displays the cover of the sheet music.

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And, below the art work - the ad copy reads - "At last - Mister Crump has arrived, (also known as Memphis Blues), the rag that captured the entire south, controlled exclusively by Bry's Music Department. If you hear it once - you'll carry a copy home with you - that's a sure bet. Fifteen cents. Three cents extra per copy by mail."

It appeared as part of Bry's full page spread - in the Memphis Commercial Appeal - Sunday - September 29th 1912 - and with it - the first piece of completely original American music officially went on sale to the public.

To be fair we should point out that some historians take offense at Handy's claim to the first blues tune, pointing out that Dallas Blues beat it to the copyright office in 1912 by a month.

But Memphis Blues, remember, had originally been written as a campaign song - called Mr. Crump - in 1909 - the only thing that had really changed was the name.

Some experts even point out that - at Handy's own admission, the original song, Mister Crump was based on an existing work - called Mama Don Low!

But in Handy's day, that practice was and - still is common place.

Using other people's music to create your own - is the basis of modern day music sampling.

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From today's perspective, it doesn't really matter as long as everyone agrees to the usage, is credited and paid for their work?

The value of an idea - much like a music sample - is in what it accomplishes.

History is packed of people who almost invented the airplane, or automobile or computer. What we remember is the Wright Brothers, Henry Ford, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs.

And we can still hear the echoes of Memphis Blues in the structure, technique and tonality of American music today.

Handy, and his song Memphis Blues may not have been first to the Copyright office - but they were the first significant - blues tune. The first to realize commercial success - success on a level that would one day spawn a trillion dollar industry.

Handy and his Memphis Blues became the conduit that allowed a little known music from the impoverished Mississippi delta, become an international phenomenon.

And it's time we take a moment to remember Main and Jefferson - North West Corner in Memphis - and Bry's - the department store that played an almost forgotten role - in the birth of American music.

The Blues as a musical genre had at last been born, and Memphis Blues was taking it's baby first steps on a journey to becoming an international smash.

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For Handy though - that fateful decision to have Theron C Bennett arrange for the printing of his song, was about turn ugly.

But that's next time, on Blues Alley.

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