

Blues Alley Ep - 6  
"The Business of Music"  
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In 1918 Pace & Handy Music Publishers packed up and took their show on the road to New York City.

Arriving in the theater district, Handy was about to wire home for money when he noticed the office of one of his jobbers. A jobber - or rack Jobber - is industry lingo for companies or individuals who place sheet music and later records, and CD's, on the racks - in retail outlets.

Handy introduced himself to the New York jobber, and discovered they were about to mail a check for \$187 to Memphis. He saved 'em the postage, dropped the check into a pocket, and decided to look up some of his other jobbers in New York.

By days end he had collected nearly a thousand dollars.

But could he make it last in New York?

Find out this time - on Blues Alley  
Episode 6 - They're More Than Songs

Flush with cash, Pace & Handy set up office at 1547 Broadway in New York. It's now a storefront in the Marriot Marquis at Times Square.

They got off to a fast start, when they arrived in town, they were sporting a new song, Eddie Green's "A Good Man is Hard to Find." They had one small problem though. Sophie Tucker had learned the song from Alberta Hunter and introduced in on Broadway, before Pace & Handy could get the tune printed.

It was the worst kind of industry problem. They had a hit, but no copies to sell.

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It didn't take long though, to catch up, and soon they outgrew the Times Square location and moved to 232 West 46th Street, now part of the Richard Rogers Theater.

Escaping Jim Crow had been a good move, but race was still in issue - even in New York.

Singer Marion Harris - known as The Jazz Vampire - sang Beale Street Blues in her vaudeville, and left a record deal, because the label didn't want a white woman singing St Louis Blues.

Gilda Gray, best know as the originator of the Shimmy Shake, a dance that created literal and figurative flutters, when the tasseled dress she wore seemed to shimmy on it's own as she danced, premiered Beale Street Blues on Broadway in Shuberts's Gaities of 1919.

The song became so ubiquitous in New York culture that F. Scott Fitzgerald mentioned Gilda Gray and Beale Street Blues by name, in his masterpiece "The Great Gatsby."

One night, at Harlem's legendary Coconut Grove Night Club, Handy was introduced, as the composer of Memphis Blues, to legendary Broadway producer Florenz Ziegfield. The great man snapped a curious - "I'll forgive you," in reply.

Handy was baffled, and it would be years before he learned what Ziegfield had meant by the crack.

Turns out that Florenz Ziegfield liked the tune so much when ever he heard it in a night club, he ended up buying drinks for the house - including the band. The tune had cost him thousands.

Meanwhile, dozens of writers joined the Pace - Handy stables, including Grant Still and Perry Bradford, the latter scoring hits for Mamie Smith, the first black artist to record a blues record in 1920.

That same year, on the strength of St Louis Blues, Beale Street Blues and A Good Man Is Hard To Find, Pace - Handy brought in royalties of \$76 grand.

As usual for Handy though, things were about to take a downturn.

While Handy was settling into the New York publishing scene, the record business was just taking off.

In 1921, his partner Harry Pace abruptly announced that he was leaving publishing to start a record company.

Pace had believed in black owned and operated media going back to his days with the Moon Illustrated magazine. He had founded a black owned and operated publishing company, even worked for a black owned and operated bank.

The record company was a logical next step.

Handy also admitted, in his autobiography, that Pace was unhappy with some his business practices, though he didn't elaborate. According to people who knew him, Handy wasn't dishonest. He was just disorganized - and not very good at business.

Though Pace's new company - Black Swan Records - would only last for two years, it remained the most successful black owned and operated label in America, until MOTOWN.

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Without the business acumen of Harry Pace, The publishing company now called Handy Brothers Music, began to struggle.

Revenue tightened, when Woolworth's discontinued music counters in their stores, a big source of cash for the Handy business.

Payments, drawn on the Solvent Savings Bank in Memphis, started to bounce, some were even charged to the personal account of Harry Pace who still had stock in the publishing company.

When an infected tooth left Handy blind for nearly two years, it became hard for him to even respond to attempts by Pace to recoup his money.

Finally, at patience end, on April 30, 1924, Pace sued Handy Brothers for mismanagement. The case would plod on for six years.

Meanwhile the Handy Brothers were barely solvent.

But things began to change when a Harvard educated, attorney named Abbe Niles, befriended Handy.

In 1926 the two men, who would remain friends for the rest of Handy's life, publish a book entitled "Blues - An Anthology," documenting the emergence of blues from African American folk tunes to Handy's latest hits.

The 1990 edition declares the book to be "an unrecognized masterpiece of the Harlem Renaissance," and David Robertson in his book "W.C. Handy, The life and times of the Man who made the Blues," characterized the Anthology as "an early example of multiculturalism."

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The Anthology, cemented Handy's place as a serious artist and composer.

In 1924 George Gershwin used blues themes as the basis of his classical masterpiece "Rhapsody in Blue."

One of Handy's most valued possessions was a piano score of the Rhapsody accompanied by a handwritten note from Gershwin reading:

"To Mr. Handy,

Whose early "blues" songs are the forefather of this work. With admiration & best wishes. - George Gershwin"

A careful listen reveals places in both Memphis Blues and Rhapsody In Blue that demonstrate just how much of a debt Gershwin owed to Handy.

It wasn't just Gershwin. Irving Berlin, would use blues themes to write pop songs. George Antheil would compose Jazz Symphonies, and Handy's personal favorite, and former employee, Grant Still would become the best orchestrator of Handy tunes.

Still's 1930 "Afro-American Symphony," used an English horn playing a 12 bar blues as it's main theme.

Handy's own tunes were doing well too.

St Louis Blues, was featured in at least ten films, including the 1929 RKO production called The St Louis Blues, starring Bessie Smith.

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That same year - 1930, Harry Pace offered to sell Handy his remaining stock - thereby ending the law suit. Handy - at the moment - had the money to accept, and Pace happily returned to the insurance business.

As Handy approached senior citizen status, honors began pouring in.

Though Boss Crump initially opposed the idea, a park was named in Handy's honor at the corner of Third and Beale in Memphis - the same corner where fourteen years earlier Handy had found a severed head thrown into a small gathering of black men.

Decades later, race was still an issue in Memphis and Boss Crump still had a long, and vengeful memory.

Robert Church Jr., who inherited the family empire when his father, the first black millionaire in the south, died, had become a political rival of Crump.

By 1940 the city administration - which Crump ran on the down low - had seized nearly all of Church's property virtually destroying his business.

Adding insult to injury, the 18 room, Church Mansion on S. Lauderdale was burned by the city.

Thousands, including 1400 fire chiefs, were on hand to watch the exercise demonstrating use of a new fire hose nozzle.

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Black newspapers across the country, were convinced that destroying the old mansion, where Frederick Douglass and Booker T Washington had been guests, was nothing less than political and racial retribution on the part of Boss Crump.

For decades there's been a story circulating about Bessie Smith being taken to a white hospital by mistake, where she was left in the hall to die, because the white staff wouldn't treat her.

In the 1970's a surgeon named Hugh Smith, confirmed that he treated her at the scene of her auto accident, and believed that a modern day trauma center probably couldn't have saved her from her injuries.

We now know she was taken to G. T. Thomas Afro-American Hospital in Clarksdale, where her arm was amputated and where "The Empress of the Blues," later died.

The apocryphal story though, as published in several industry magazines, has persisted.

And it does have an unfortunate ring of truth about it.

On March 26th, 1937 Elizabeth Handy suffered a stroke, and arrangements were made to transport her to the nearest hospital.

According to the New York Times, Elizabeth Handy was kept in a parked ambulance outside the Knickerbocker Hospital for forty-five minutes, as the staff continued to insist that they didn't accept colored patients in the private ward.

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They accused Handy of misrepresenting the situation - because he didn't tell them she was black.

Elizabeth Handy, was eventually admitted - but only after her husband paid for a week in advance.

She died later that night of a cerebral hemorrhage.

Officially her death wasn't due to the delay, but New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, felt sufficiently ashamed that he pointed out that the Knickerbocker wasn't a city run facility and did not represent New York.

Handy would likely have read the industry trade paper accounts of the Bessie Smith story from six months earlier. One can only imagine what he felt.

Just before Elizabeth's death, Handy curated and published "W.C. Handy's Collection of Negro Spirituals," a book still studied today.

In 1940, on the expiration of it's 28 year term, Handy and Abbe Niles went- in person - to the Library of Congress, to reclaim the copyright of Memphis Blues.

The following year, he published "Father of the Blues - an autobiography."

While waiting on a train, Handy fell from a subway platform onto the tracks, suffering head injuries that - this time - left him permanently blind.

It slowed him down, but didn't stop him. He did a series of recordings for the national archives, and the New York City Choral Ensemble.

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At the dawn of the television age, he charmed audiences on Ed Sullivan's "Toast of the Town."

And in an appropriate bookend to his song writing career - one of the last songs he published was a campaign song, for 1952 presidential candidate Dwight D Eisenhower.

Handy's last musical appearance, though he didn't perform, was at New York's Lewisohn Stadium with Leonard Bernstein conducting St Louis Blues. Louis Armstrong played Handy's role on trumpet.

A 1957 bio-pic of the composers life was released by Paramount starring Nat King Cole in the lead role, though the film was largely fictional.

A postage stamp was issued with his likeness, and a statue of the composer was erected in Handy Park.

A music festival, that still runs today, attracting hundreds of thousands of music fans to Memphis, bares his name.

Novels have been written using lines from his lyrics.

Beale Street Blues had a James Baldwin novel, and subsequent 2018 film "If Beale Street Could talk, named after the first line of the chorus.

The opening line of St Louis Blues - "I Hate To See That Evenin' Sun Go down" - has been echoed in American Literature as the title of short stories by both William Faulkner and William Gay - and the lyric is directly quoted in the play "No Exit" by John Paul Sartre.

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St Louis Blues, has been recorded by thousands of artists and is today known as the "Jazzman's Hamlet" - a song essential to the repertoire of every jazz musician.

Until the end of his life - an era when the average annual income in America was around \$3500 - St Louis Blues earned Handy \$25 grand a year.

The man whose father had told him, he'd rather follow him to the cemetery in a hearse - than see him become a musician, had surpassed anything he could've imagined.

And all from a chance encounter at a Tutwiler train station.

It's worth remembering, that Handy's contribution wasn't in inventing the genre of blues music. That had existed for decades.

His genius was in turning blues into a national brand - seeing the path to a wider audience. The same path Sam Phillips would take forty-five years later with a young kid named Elvis Presley.

Without that wide spread appeal, that turned American culture into a commodity, the nations impact and influence on the world, economically and otherwise, would've undoubtedly been diminished.

The debt America owes to black musicians and composers like W. C. Handy is immeasurable.

On the 29th of March, 1958 William Christopher Handy died of pneumonia in a Harlem hospital. He was 85.

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New York police estimated the crowd gathered to watch the funeral procession at 150,000.

Another 2500 were gathered inside the church, including Cab Calloway, Eubie Blake, Oscar Hammerstein, Langston Hughes, Ed Sullivan and New York Mayor Robert Wagner.

Congressman and Reverend Adam Clayton Powell Jr, delivered the eulogy, proclaiming that "Gabriel now has an understudy."

As Handy's casket was transported to Woodlawn Cemetery, a band leading the way paused their performance of the funeral march. The band leader was heard to say... "All right men. A little bit faster this time," as they struck up St Louis Blues.

Though this final performance was instrumental, everyone lining the street that day, knew the lyric, I Hat To See That Evening Sun Go Down. They sang along, if only as a silent prayer to themselves.

Memphis Civil rights leader G W Lee in his eulogy called "I Knew Handy," put it this way...

The life of W.C. Handy, and the story of how he originated the blues has been told many times. He has been honored by everybody.

Beale Street Blues, Memphis Blues and St Louis Blues hold fast to something deep down inside of one.

They are more than songs, the are a loving, shining symbol that only the soul of a man can understand.

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