Blues Alley - Ep 5
"A Change Is Gonna Come"

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Nashville, TN

Memphis Blues was a huge hit.

Theron C. Bennett - the white man who had conned Handy out of the song's copyright - had added a new lyric by George Norton, and vocal arrangements were catching on.

Back in Memphis, W.C. Handy wanted to make sure nothing like the theft of Memphis Blues ever happened again, and he wanted to write another hit. A bigger hit.

But could a black man in Jim Crow Memphis make those wishes come true?

We'll find out, this time on Blues Alley!

Episode 5 - A Change Is Gonna Come

Handy had the foresight to keep his song writer credit when he sold the Memphis Blues, copyright to Theron Bennett. But it was the new lyric by George Norton, that drove home, his contribution to the tune.

The first verse concludes with the lines -

"They had a fellow there named Handy with a band you should hear

And while the white folks gently swayed, all them band boys played Real harmony.

I never will forget the tune that Handy called the Memphis Blues."

It's a lyrical homage to the composer.

The rest of the lyric however, was a miserable fail.

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It referred to a saxophone - which clearly Norton had never heard - as a “big bassoon,” and touted the tall southern pines of west Tennessee. Memphis - of course - was known as the hardwood capital of the world.

While the song didn’t generate any income for the composer - it had made Handy a local celebrity.

The Alaskan Roof Garden - Memphis hottest night spot - strung a banner across the intersection of Main and Madison touting “Handy’s Band - The best band in the South!”

In true Jim Crow fashion though, white business leaders threw a fit, and eventually had the banner taken down under fire and police regulations.

Interestingly fire and police was the department Boss Crump had run until he was elected Mayor a few years earlier - with the help of Handy’s campaign song.

But the tide of popularity, wouldn’t be stemmed.

The song elevated the stature of Memphis to a level it had never known before.

Local white bands began playing the song with civic pride, and the Memphis Chamber of Commerce hired the all black Handy to play for a national real estate convention held in Memphis.

It was here that Handy first began to realize the impact of his song nationwide.

After the band’s performance of Memphis Blues was met with thunderous applause, the incessant speechifying began. But, no one was prepared for the topic of the day.
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Local magistrate, Judge Greer took to the podium and began:

“I came here with a prepared speech on the old South, but after hearing that boy sing and that band play, I’m going to throw away my speech and talk about the Negro - the most wonderful race on the face of God’s green earth!”

And there was more to come.

The editor of the morning paper - C.P.J. Mooney continued Greer’s thread by adding:

“We have made a serious mistake in inviting men from all parts of the country to make investments in a city where one-third of its population is painted as vicious. No race that can play as these men have done can be vicious. Why, the Memphis Blues has done more to advertise Memphis than all the publicity emanating from the Businessmen’s Association.”

Handy and his entire band were floored. Even though he wasn’t receiving the financial rewards, from his hit song, Handy was beginning to realize the importance of the business side of music.

Conveniently there was black business community in Memphis that had been growing in prosperity since the 1870s.

By the time Handy arrived in Memphis, Robert Reed Church was a real estate magnate, with most of his property centered around Beale Street, just south of downtown.

Born in 1839 - Church’s mother was a slave and his father a white riverboat captain for whom Church worked as a steward.

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During the civil war his steamboat was attacked. Church dove to safety and swam ashore near Memphis just as the steamer - named The Bulletin - exploded and burned.

He shimmied up the bluff, without a cent to his name and made his way into town.

For a while he worked as a stable hand, and shoe shine boy, eventually saving enough money to open the saloon, that would begin an empire.

He gradually began buying up property on Beale and Gayoso Street one block to the north. Before long, he had accrued enormous wealth and power.

He built a family a mansion at 392 S Lauderdale, the heart of Memphis finest neighborhood. His daughter Annette later described the home in an interview with Memphis State University researchers, as having Brussels carpets on the floor made of velvet - and chandeliers... There was a large oil painting of... the Bulletin, the boat that had exploded and caught fire.

Robert Reed Church was widely considered to be the South’s first black millionaire.

In his later years he would build Church Park auditorium, a twenty-two hundred seat venue aimed at bringing quality arts, music and theater to the black community.

He was life long friends with Governors and Senators, both black and white.

In 1902 President Teddy Roosevelt was a guest at a Church Park reception. Frederick Douglass stayed at the Church mansion, as did Church’s longtime friend, Booker T Washington.
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While Washington believed in success for African Americans through hard work - Church believed in advancement through civic engagement, education, the arts, voting rights and commerce.

To support the latter, Church founded the Solvent Savings Bank at 392 Beale, the largest black owned and operated bank in the US.

But the ironic secret behind the man, was that much of the Church real estate empire consisted of saloons, gambling parlors and brothels.

He wasn't alone - a hand written record of Church properties in 1912 shows fifty-one of the sixty-six properties listed were leased to female tenants - unusual at the time, and a likely indication that the properties were used as brothels. And, four of those properties were acquired in the 1870s from John Overton Jr. the son of a city founder.

Legend has it that Overton's wife found out what he was up to in the Southside tenderloin, and insisted he sell the sporting houses.

When Robert Church died in 1912 - his son Bob took over the empire.

W.C. Handy would forge a life long friendship with Bob Church Jr. and it was at Bob Church's, Solvent Savings Bank that a partnership between Handy and a cashier named Harry Pace would first emerge.

Taking Handy a step further along his path to success.

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Harry H. Pace had been valedictorian of his 1903 class at Atlanta University - and shortly after college he moved to Memphis - where he raised $3000 to begin publishing the Moon Illustrated Weekly with Ida B Wells and W.E.B. DuBose.

The Moon was the nation’s first illustrated weekly for African Americans, but it only lasted for a couple of years.

After the magazine folded - DuBose moved to New York and co-founded the N.A.A.C.P. with another Memphian, Bob Church’s sister, Mary.

Pace would eventually return to Atlanta and go into the insurance business, but he started out as a cashier - working for Bob Church Jr., at the Solvent Savings Bank on Beale.

He was a perfect partner for Handy, a businessman with talent.

Handy had always had a difficult relationship with banking and finance in general.

He had borrowed money against his home furnishings. His trumpet was frequently in hock at Lipmann and Sons Pawn Shop on Beale.

Old Mr. Lippman, had a soft spot for musicians, and allowed Handy to “borrow” his horn to play gigs, so he could make a living - and keep paying the pawn note on his axe.

As a result of Memphis Blues, the Handy band was increasingly popular - even so - they were still playing for three dollars a night, hoping for an extra set to make it four.

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That was the situation, when Handy approached Harry Pace about starting a publishing company.

Though Handy knew him as a bank cashier, Harry Pace was also a songwriter with experience. He’d had a song called “In the Cotton Fields of Dixie,” published in 1907, and had been himself of course the publisher of the Moon Illustrated.

The first song published by Pace and Handy Music Company was Handy’s Jogo Blues. Jogo being a slang term translating roughly to “black and proud of it.” At the same time they also released Pace’s “The Girl You Never Have Met.”

Neither song did very well commercially, and Pace soon headed back to Atlanta to become the secretary-treasurer of the Standard Life Insurance Company.

Meanwhile in Memphis Handy was still composing away.

He cranked out Joe Turner Blues, Hesitating Blues, and Yellow Dog Blues, based on the tune he’d heard while waiting on that train in Tutwiler.

None of these though, were as big as Memphis Blues.

To keep food on the table, Handy returned to the business he knew best, conducting a band. He ran a side hustle, bootlegging black newspapers into Memphis, a practice that could’ve gotten him lynched if he’d been caught.

He also started a booking agency for his fellow Beale Street musicians. It assured that he always had good players, and they had good gigs.
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But the writing and publishing was still stuck in neutral. He just couldn’t seem to gain ground in the music business.

Handy knew his songs were good, and when he complained about his lack of success, to his Aunt - Matt Jordan - she suggested that maybe he was too good, stating matter of factly - that - “white folks like to hear colored folks make some mistakes.”

And that suggestion - intentionally including errors in his compositions - had given Handy an idea for a new song.

After the Memphis Blues debacle, and the unfortunate lyric, he had set a goal for himself of writing a melody and an accompanying lyric that had as he put it - “some real emotion.”

So, based on a story he had witnessed as a young man on the St Louis riverfront, Handy began to spin the tale of a distraught woman, bemoaning the absence of her lover, whose heart was like a rock cast in the sea.

Flirting with minstrelsy - Handy began work on a lyric in the common African American vernacular.

But instead of seeming like a parody of black culture - in Handy’s hands - the lyric had an authenticity - a poetic quality - showcasing a uniquely musical American language, and setting the scene for a tragedy to rival any written by William Shakespeare.

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Musically, he “tricked” his audience - as he put it - by using the tango - the hottest dance in America at the time as the rhythm of his B section, then breaking into a “low down,” 12 bar blues shuffle for the chorus.

The song of course was St. Louis Blues - today the best known of all blues songs.

At the time though, it was a gamble. One Handy thought was worth taking.

With his partner Harry Pace, still AWOL in Atlanta working in insurance, Handy printed ten thousand copies of St Louis Blues, based on enough pre-orders from Kress and Woolworths to completely cover the printing cost.

The real question was - Would the mainstream market place accept African American dialect as a serious art form - as opposed to the parody of black culture - present in minstrelsy.

And it wasn’t just whites Handy had to be concerned with. For years, black intellectuals had been actively steering the language away from the common vernacular, which they saw as regressive - even ignorant.

Would his new song be facing grievance from both blacks and whites?

Handy was about to find out.

With St Louis Blues published and Memphis Blues rising in popularity, Handy found himself facing a unique timing problem.

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His growing fame was generating high paying offers from white Country clubs and venues. Unfortunately his band was already booked for lower paying gigs at the black clubs on Beale, and he couldn’t - in good conscience - cancel the contracts.

His musicians quickly became annoyed at having to pass up better paying gigs because their leader had scruples.

The band - though doing better - was still only playing for six dollars a night, and Handy’s horn was still in and out of soak at Morris Lippmann’s Pawnshop.

When Harry Pace returned to Memphis on insurance business, after paying little attention to the publishing company, he discovered that St Louis Blues had turned profit of $400 from the Woolworths and Kress deals.

It wasn’t a fortune, but Pace and Handy was solvent.

Seeing some hope in music after all, Pace set up a concert for Handy at the Opera House in Atlanta.

On May 12, 1916 - when the curtain rose - on the same stage where Caruso had performed - the all black band was met with a staggering silence.

Then they began to play.

After their signature song, Memphis Blues, the ovation, as the Atlanta Constitution wrote “shook the rafters.”

On this night - at the Opera House - there was no sign of Puccini, Wagner or Mozart.

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Instead Handy, in his role as the American Bach - and his contemporaries Clarence Williams and Jasper Taylor were stepping into their place as the new the musical vanguard of twentieth century.

Then Handy's twelve year old daughter stepped forward and sang St Louis Blues. Followed by encore after encore.

The audience - hundreds of them white, wouldn't let the band leave.

In the end they were held over for a week. The Atlanta Constitution began to market them as the most famous black band in the world.

On returning to Memphis however - they were right back working for six bucks a night.

While playing a Colonial Country Club dance one evening, Handy got a phone call from his brother.

Charles Handy had taken to checking in at the post office at midnight to see if any royalty checks had arrived on the late train.

This particular night a check from the Victor Phonograph Corporation had come in at a whopping $1,857 dollars, a years worth of income in a single check.

The next check - this time from Columbia Records, caught Handy on the Union Station railroad platform catching a train to another six dollar a night gig.

This royalty payment was for $3,827 dollars.

Records were starting to pay off.

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Harry Pace had arranged for the Handy band to record ten sides at the Columbia studio in New York city. While the money was magnificent, it was causing all sorts of other problems for Handy.

The whole project had been a disaster from the start. First off much of the Memphis band had refused to participate - believing if they recorded their music no one would ever want to pay to hear them play live again.

Handy was forced to use New York and Chicago musicians, instead of his tried and tested Memphis orchestra. Then the Chicago musicians union - fearing this newfangled recording technology - threatened to sanction any member of the local who joined the New York session.

The result - according to Handy - was disappointing at best.

The session itself was an exercise in awkward.

There was no such thing as electronic recording in those days. There were no microphones.

The band played into a series of giant gramaphone horns - or megaphones - acoustically connected to a Victrola, which etched the sounds directly onto a disc.

This acoustic type of recording required louder instruments to be farther away than softer instruments for balance.

According to Handy, the clarinettist was perched on a six foot tall stool. The saxes in a corner, the fiddles gathered down front, and the brasses were as far away as physically possible.
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Drums and bass were excluded entirely, as there was, as yet, no way to successfully record those instruments.

While Handy didn’t like the recordings, Columbia did. They heavily promoted the tracks, generating a fair amount of revenue for themselves and the composer.

Meanwhile back in Memphis. Mayor Crump had been removed from office by the State Legislature for refusing to enforce a Tennessee liquor prohibition law.

As a result - the reform platform that Crump had originally run on - then proceeded to ignore, actually came to life in Memphis.

A move to restrict brothels, gambling dens, and saloons, in the south side tenderloin actually went into effect.

For the first time in living memory P Wee’s saloon closed at midnight.

Beale Street had gone dry.

Handy, disturbed by this loss of what he saw as the best of black American culture, began writing about his memory of the district’s heyday and crafted Beale Street Blues in 1917.

The opening verse set the scene.

“You’ll see pretty browns, in beautiful gowns.
Tailor mades and hand me downs.
You’ll meet honest men and pick pockets skilled.
You’ll find that business never closes til somebody gets killed.”

The final line of course echoing the Virgilio Maffei’s slogan at P Wee’s saloon.

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And in a phrase still familiar today, Handy further lamented -

“If Beale Street Could Talk -
married men would have to take
their beds and walk.
Except for a few who never drink
booze and the blind man on the
corner singing Beale Street Blues.”

It was, and is, an anthem to the pantheon of black culture, an homage to Main Street of Black America.

And though P Wee’s - according to legend anyway - would only close at midnight that one time, Beale Street, was changing.

Musicians would answer the phone at P Wee’s, and decline gigs before Handy ever heard about the offer.

They accused their boss ripping them off by taking a commission, ignoring the fact that their livelihoods, were largely trading on the Handy name and reputation.

A Beale Street musician friend, Professor Todd, summed it up for Handy like this...

“If you’re powerful enough to tell them where they can work. They figure, you may become powerful enough to tell them where they can’t work.”

At that moment, Handy knew it was just a matter of time. But the time was coming come far sooner than he expected.

During a gig for the Piedmont Exhibition in Atlanta, the band split into factions and began to fight - on a float - in the middle of a parade. Handy had to dragoon a police officer to prevent his own band from stabbing and shooting one another.
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When he related the story to Harry
Pace, the two men began to realize
that current crop of musicians
just weren't the same as the old
crowd.

Pace advised Handy to move on...
close up shop in Memphis and head
for New York.

But the betrayal of his own band,
wasn't the only thing that would
inform his decision.

Next time on Blues Alley!

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