

"I KNEW HANDY"

By Geo. W. Lee

In the St. Louis Blues, one of the all-time great songs of Americana, there is a haunting line which hangs in the American mind like tinsels on a Christmas tree. It goes "I hate to see that evening sun go down". For W. C. Handy, the composer of this immortal tune, the evening sun has gone down for the last time.

C Handy had been blind for years. He used a wheelchair because of a stroke. Last Thursday at 3 o'clock in the morning at the Sydenham Hospital, he passed quietly into another world at a time when he didn't have to see the evening sun go down.

O Rivers full of muddy water have rolled down to the sea since that night back in 1909 when Handy first got a blues song right in his head and set it down on music paper. A million bands have gone to town on that song, the Memphis Blues. A million voices have echoed P it like winged music through eternity and a million juke boxes have swelled up loud in smoke-laden night clubs from Beale Street to a crossroad shack in the Montana plains.

Y For the past forty years America has been singing Handy's first song, the Memphis Blues. Its mood and melody has resounded around the world. Its melody created the St. Louis Blues which <sup>went</sup> ~~was~~ with President Harding's Flgaship to Alaska and to Washington to entertain Ramsey MacDonald. But the Father of the Blues has no more melody in his soul, nor will he listen again to one of his great sacred songs "They That Sow in Tears Shall Reap In Joy."

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. His hometown of Florence, Alabama recently erected a handsome ultra-modern public school in his honor; Memphis has a town square named

after him and St. Louis has a Scholarship Fund in his name to be awarded annually to worthy Negro and white youngsters with musical talent. The Fund offices will be housed in a new building to be erected on the spot where Handy once slept as a hobo. The huge clock on its facade will play the opening bars of the St. Louis Blues on the hour.

C Handy made a long step from Alabama to the advancing wave of circumstances on which he advanced himself to one of the high pinnacles of earthly grandeur and renown.

O He was born on November 16, 1873 in Florence, Alabama. As a child he was thrilled by the singing of his people. In his tenth year, he could read music at sight and he had a good tenor voice. His father and mother wanted him to be a minister, but Handy wanted to be a musician. His first step was to get enough money to pay for P instructions. To this end, he left home and walked all the way to Birmingham, where he taught school for awhile. When the depression that marked the Cleveland administration brought general unemployment, he joined a saloon quartet and set out for the World's Fair at Chicago. Y The singers had no money, so they hopped a freight train and attempted to beat their way west. Luckily for them, the brakeman who discovered them had a weakness for songs, so with Cornet and Guitar, as Handy said "they soothed his salvaged breast", and instead of being red-lighted, they were conducted to a caboose deluxe.

In 1897 Handy returned to Alabama and taught vocal and band music at the Agricultural and Mechanical College in Huntsville. His life at this period was restless, <sup>interspersed</sup> ~~interspersed~~ with travel in Mexico, Cuba and Canada. Handy the composer had not found himself. It was in Memphis,

out along Beale Street and the privation of poverty-stricken cabins and slender precarious meals. The crowd in the streets liberally

Tennessee where Handy received the impetus that sent him along the road to renown.

Through the mist of the years he beheld the golden towers of his dreams rise at last against a background of reality. A great impulse to set the songs of the cotton pickers, the work songs of the railroad, the river songs of the roustabouts who made music as they worked. To them singing was a necessity, rather than a luxury. W. C. Handy, who like Stephen Foster, brooded over the songs of the Negro flowing in quick tears and laughter straight from his unhappy heart. So, in Memphis, Handy emphasized the native and nationalistic element of these songs and gave them as an enduring gift to America's treasury of music. *Stop*

. A political situation in 1909 afforded nationwide publicity for Handy and his new music. In that year Williams, Talbot, and E. H. Crump, were running for election for Mayor of Memphis. Jim Mulchay, political ward boss, hired Handy to play for Crump. Echford and Bynam bands were employed for the other two candidates. In order to out-do these two great bands, Handy was spurred to creative efforts. Down in Clarksville, Mississippi, in St. Louis, Missouri, in Evansville, Indiana, in Henderson, Kentucky and later on Beale Street, Handy had devoted himself to acquiring the material and atmosphere which would someday aid him in making a musical rendition of Negro Folk Songs.

Now he found his store of knowledge useful in another way. His band opened the campaign at Main and Madison with a piece called "Mr. Crump", a composition which took the shape of the inevitable results of the tempo of cotton-picking work songs along the aching side of old man river, of happy nights in the pleasure palaces strung out along Beale Street and the privation of poverty-~~stricken~~<sup>chinked</sup> cabins and slender precarious meals. The crowd in the streets literally

went wild over it. They shouted until they were hoarse demanding to hear it again and again. They whistled and danced with the rhythmic sway of the music as the words came with the drift of the wind:

"Mr. Crump don't 'low no easy riders here,  
Mr. Crump won't 'low no easy riders here.  
I don't care what Mr. Crump don't 'low,  
I'm gonna bar'l-house anyhow.  
Mr. Crump can go and catch hisself some air."

That tune was the vehicle which carried two to victory. Handy rode on it from Beale Street to Broadway. Crump, to twenty-five years of undisputed political leadership in Memphis. After the election, the Mr. Crump song was changed and titled "Memphis Blues" and offered for publication. After every publisher in the country had turned it down as worthless, it was sold to T. C. Bennett a young white man, head of the Music Department of a department store, for one hundred dollars. The young white man made a fortune out of the "Memphis Blues."

Handy's next number, the "St. Louis Blues" suffered the same fate with the publishers as did the Memphis Blues. When the publishers rejected it and laughed at him, he became discouraged and laid it aside. Finally, he organized the Pace and Handy Music Company to publish the St. Louis Blues.

This little song about the man stealing woman with her diamond rings, has sold more than two million copies, is played and recorded in almost every country on the map and has become one of America's national anthems.

The growth of Handy's music in our times has a consequence which is still impossible to determine. I think; someday this music called

the blues will provide the raw material which will stimulate American culture. *Insertion*

*Revis* There are many people in these vast United States, who have become famous in the field of music, but without a doubt the leader and dean of them all is the late W. C. Handy, famous for composing and writing the Memphis, the St. Louis, the Beale Street Blues and in addition, many sacred songs that America is now listening to, such as "They That Sow In Tears Shall Reap In Joy".

Among the outstanding and leading books that have been written by Handy, Father of the Blues, his autobiography and Treasury of the Blues, which he edited.

The last time Handy was a visitor in my home, he said that Handy Brothers Music Company was about to publish an outstanding symphony called "Blue Destiny". The first movement would be based on the St. Louis Blues, the second movement on the Beale Street Blues, the fourth movement based on the Harlem Blues and the Memphis Blues.

So, the dean of American music has passed. He brought to the American public songs that the heart cannot tell in its own futile terms, but must borrow out of travesty and fervent plant, the walls from which he drew his own great songs.

The Beale Street Blues, the Memphis Blues, the St. Louis Blues holds fast to something deep down inside of one. They are more than songs. They are a loving, shining symbol that only the soul of man can understand.

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