



# W. C. Handy

W. C. Handy was born in Florence, Alabama. He was born William Christopher Handy on November 16, 1873 to Elizabeth Brewer and Charles Barnard Handy. Both his father and his grandfather were ministers in the African Methodist Episcopal tradition.

Handy grew up around music, like most African Americans. The musical traditions that early African Americans developed grew into what became known as jazz and the blues. Both genres developed along similar timelines (in the 1800s to early 1900s) in areas where African Americans were enslaved in large numbers, in the Mississippi Delta and in New Orleans.

W.C. Handy was inquisitive and had a natural love of music, starting at an early age, despite the objections of his father. He studied and taught at what is today Alabama A&M University.

Handy continued to explore music and musical instruments into his adult life and, quite simply, Handy was a musical genius. He travelled with bands and shows, and sometimes started his own bands, while writing the music for their performances.

He spent years studying his craft, working in minstrel shows and leading bands, as he travelled to Cuba and throughout parts of the United States.

By 1909, at about the age of 36, Handy had moved to Memphis and his musical talents were recognized by a man, named E. H. Crump, who was running for mayor of the city. Crump hired W. C. Handy to be the bandleader for his campaign and his music became extremely popular. Handy wrote a tune called, "Mr. Crump", where he merged ragtime with elements of the blues.



# A Musical Genius

The song helped to lead E. H. Crump to victory and it catapulted Handy to musical success. W. C. Handy then changed the name of the song to “The Memphis Blues” and began selling the sheet music in department stores on September 28, 1912. The music was so popular that the first 1,000 copies sold out in just three days. But, this was a time when Black people had little access to the levers of power such as wide-spread publishing facilities, ownership of large businesses and stores, political authority, etc.

Handy’s publisher tricked him and told him that the song had flopped and that he owned him money. He convinced Handy to sell him the rights to the song for just \$50.



## A Smart Businessman

W. C. Handy, as I have mentioned, was a quick learner. He developed a partnership with Harry Pace (an African-American businessman) called, the Pace & Handy Music Co., and began publishing **his own sheet music**. In 1914 he published the classic, “St. Louis Blues.” His genius can be seen in the way he set up “St. Louis Blues”:

“When ‘St. Louis Blues’ was written the tango was in vogue. I tricked the dancers by arranging a tango introduction, breaking abruptly into a low-down blues. My eyes swept the floor anxiously, then suddenly I saw lightning strike. The dancers seemed electrified. Something within them came suddenly to life. An instinct that wanted so much to live, to fling its arms to spread joy, took them by the heels.”

Two decades later this song was still earning Handy \$25,000 in royalties a year.

In many ways he was ahead of his times and his mind was focused and ingenious. I think he would have been successful in whatever he put his mind to—thankfully he applied it to music.

# A Musical Genius

Handy also made such American classics as:

- “The Memphis Blues”, 1912
- “St. Louis Blues”, 1914
- "Hesitating Blues", 1915
- “Beale Street Blues”, 1916
- “Aunt Hagar’s Blues”, 1920
- “Long Gone (From the Bowling Green)”, 1920
- “Loveless Love”, 1921
- “Atlanta Blues”, 1923

W. C. Handy revolutionized music by adding blues components into popular music.

How do you think W. C. Handy’s music might have affected the music your parents listened to and the music you listen to today? (Answer the question in 5 complete sentences).



References: Smith, Danita. "W.C. Handy: A Musical Genius". Black and Education, 9-29-2021. Accessed online June 25, 2023, <https://blackandeducation.org/stories/2021/9/29/wc-handy-musical-genius> Image:

W.C. Handy, photograph by Carl Van Vechten, July 17, 1941