



W. C. HANDY: FATHER OF THE BLUES

W. C. Handy is known as the “Father of the Blues” for introducing many people to a new musical style—the blues—and for helping make it popular. As a songwriter, bandleader, musician, recording artist, and music publisher, he played a big role in transforming the Black folksongs of his youth into soulful American blues.

Born in Florence, Alabama, in 1873, William Christopher Handy was the son of a minister and his wife, both of whom were former slaves. He was raised on Black hymns and spirituals, but he also was drawn to the music he heard on the streets and from traveling musicians. He learned to play the cornet as a teenager and soon began his career in traveling bands.

In 1903, he settled in Clarksdale, Mississippi, where he led a dance band, and one night while waiting for a train, he heard a local guitarist playing a sad song that reminded him of the folksongs he heard as a boy. Handy had thought of them as “simple,” but as he wrote in his 1941 autobiography, he “suddenly saw the songs with the eye of a budding composer.” Listening with new ears set him off on a mission to turn these old songs of “suffering and hard luck” into new music.

In 1914, while living in Memphis, he wrote what is considered his masterpiece, “St. Louis Blues,” and published it through the music publishing house he co-owned, Pace & Handy Music Company. The song sold a million copies of sheet music and brought Handy fame and fortune. He followed with hit after hit into the 1920s, combining scraps of old melodies and lyrics to



form complete songs. “Each one of my blues is based on some old Negro song of the South. Some old song that is a part of the memories of my childhood and of my race,” Handy told an interviewer. “I can tell you the exact song I used as a basis for any one of my blues. Yes, the blues that are genuine are really folk-songs.”

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LISTEN

“St. Louis Blues,” “Memphis Blues,” “Beale Street Blues,” “Loveless Love,” “Hesitating Blues”



W. C. HANDY: FATHER OF THE BLUES (CONTINUED)

Handy continued his music publishing career in New York and, during the 1930s, composed several spirituals. His songs were sung and recorded by both Black and white artists, and they inspired many songwriters to follow his lead. When he died in 1958, it was a major news story in newspapers all over the country, and 150,000 people lined the streets of New York for his funeral.



CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. What is the significance of the song that brought W. C. Handy “fame and fortune”?

2. Circle the word “composer” in paragraph three. Underline the clue words and phrases that help you understand the meaning of the word. Based on the context clues, what is the meaning of the word?

3. Explain W. C.’s greatest impact on music in your own words. Highlight evidence for your answer in the text.
