

W.C. Handy
1873-1958
F.A.M.E. March/April 2008

Costume: Old work clothes

(Play track 11). The music you are listening to is William Christopher Handy's classic, "St. Louis Blues". This song, written over 90 years ago, was one of the most recorded songs in the history of music. In the 1920's, blues songs, like this one, became a national craze. Records by blues singers sold in the millions. Blues significantly influenced the jazz and rock & roll music that followed. Where did the blues come from? We have to go back in time to understand why and how the blues began.

What would I be doing if I was dressed this way? Would I be going to a fancy party? (no, I am dressed for work). Are there any jobs that you have to do that you don't like to do? (describe a job you dislike – ironing, cleaning, etc. Allow students to give a few examples of jobs they don't like to do). When you have a job you don't like to do, but you have to do it, is there any way you can make the job more pleasant? (Listening to music can make the time pass more quickly and help set up a pace for work).

There was a group of people in American who had to work all of the time. Most people came to American from other countries by choice; others were brought here against their will. Many people from Africa were taken from their land and families and forced to be slaves in America. What is a slave? (*Imagine that you were taken from your family, tied up, thrown down in the bottom of a ship, taken across the ocean to a strange country, bought by another person who views you as "property" and forces you to work all day.*)

Since these slaves were made to work very hard, what do you think they did to make the work seem easier and help them feel a little happier? (They sang songs. Hint: sing "Whistle While you Work" from Snow White). Songs sung by the slaves were sung in rhythm with the physical movement in their activity, serving as a psychological ploy to make the work seem less hard. The evening was the time when they would sing and dance for their own pleasure. They sang with "soul", pouring all the longings and dreams of freedom and dignity into their songs.

What kinds of instruments do you think they used? (clapping using thighs, feet, hips. They would use two spoons clapping together, an old pot, or even a fine-toothed comb).

Biography

Our composer based his music on these early slave folk songs. W.C. Handy, an African-American, is known as the "Father of the Blues". He was born in Alabama in 1873, eight years after the Emancipation Proclamation. Can anyone tell me what that is? (Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves). Both his father and grandfather were Methodist ministers. His father didn't want him to be a musician as he believed music was the work of the devil. Handy saw a guitar in the window of a store, and saved money by picking berries and making and selling lye soap. After Handy had worked and saved for months and bought

the guitar, his father made him take it back and buy something useful – a dictionary! By the time Handy was ten, he could tell the musical notes sung by birds and the whistles of nearby riverboats. Without his parent's knowledge, he was given an old cornet and learned how to play the instrument. He must have practiced very hard. Here is a quote from his biography: "life is something like this trumpet. If you don't put anything in it, you don't get anything out".

He organized a quartet that performed at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. After the fair, Handy traveled the country, trying to make a career in music. Around this time, he married his first wife. After the birth of their first child (first of six children), he stopped touring and took a job at A&M College in Alabama. However, he wasn't satisfied with teaching (mainly with the pay and Handy also felt the college tossed aside "American music" in favor of that inferior foreign "classical" music) and left to join a group called Mahara's Minstrels. Can you guess what instrument he played? (Cornet). He eventually became the leader of the troupe, traveled extensively and even performed in Cuba. W.C. Handy might have just been another very good musician had it not been for a couple of events that led Handy to what we know as "The Blues".

HOW WE GOT "THE BLUES"

The first event happened while Handy was waiting for a train to Mississippi. His train was several hours late and he was trying to get some sleep when he noticed an African-American playing a guitar beside him. This is a quote from Handy in his autobiography.

"His clothes were rags, his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar. The effect was unforgettable. His song too, struck me instantly. "*Goin where the southern cross' the Dog*" The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard. The tune stayed in my mind. When the singer paused, I leaned over and asked him what the words meant. He rolled his eyes, showing a trace of mild amusement. Perhaps I should have known what they meant, but he didn't mind explaining. This fellow was going where the railroad nicknamed the "Yellow Dog" crosses the southbound railroad. He was simply singing as he waited".

Handy remembered the song with fondness, but it took one more event to change his musical direction. He was leading his dance orchestra at a performance for a white audience when Handy was asked to play some of his "native music". This baffled him. They were musicians who bowed strictly to the printed notes. They played an old Southern melody but the audience protested that he was not honoring their request. His group was asked to step aside and three local African-American men came on stage with battered string instruments and struck up an over-and-over strain that seemed to have no clear beginning and no end. A rain of coins began to fall around the stomping feet. Dollars, quarter, half dollars – the shower continued so long that Handy realized these locals had earned more money than his nine musicians were being paid for their entire engagement. He saw the beauty in this music and the power it had to move a crowd. It was a lesson that would change his life.

THE MUSIC

Handy began to give the public what they wanted...The Blues. In discussing his songs, Handy said, "each one of my blues is based on some old Negro song of the South.. Something that sticks in my mind, that I hum to myself when I'm not thinking about it. Some old song that is a part of the memories of my childhood and of my race. I can tell you the exact song I used as a basis for any one of my blues."

The "St. Louis Blues" proved to be his best-selling number. Some of the lyrics to this song are "I hate 'o see the evening sun go down.....Cause my baby, done left this town." The singer doesn't want night to come because his love is gone and he'll be alone. He's melancholy and "singing the blues". The popularity of "St. Louis Blues" was not confined just to the United States. Great Britain's King Edward VII asked Scottish bagpipers to play it for him. It was performed at Prince George's and Grecian Princess Marina's wedding. Years later, it was said to be a favorite of Queen Elizabeth II. Even more fascinating is that in the 1930's, when Ethiopia was invaded by Italy, it became the Ethiopian battle hymn.

At the beginning of WWII, the French thought the Nazis would ban jazz after the U.S. entered the war, a French music critic gave the song a French name, "St. Louis Blues" became in French, "the Sadness of St. Louis" and they continued to play the song. In Vienna, under Nazi occupation, local musicians gave it the very German title of "Sauerkraut", thus slipping it past officials.

The song was so popular that 40 years after it was first published, Handy was still receiving annual royalties of nearly \$25,000 (which was a lot of money in the 1950's). Not only was the song a hit, the blues sounds of Handy and other blues musicians had a big influence on the development of jazz and rock & roll.

To see how the song is adapted to different music styles. The CD has 8 different versions of St. Louis Blues. The first track has the lyrics sung by Kay Starr (famous performer of the 1940's), track 2 is Duke Ellington (blues version), track 3 is Glen Miller with a big band beat, track 4 is Dave Brubeck (jazz), track 5 is a country version, track 6 is a tango version, track 7 is Louis Armstrong with a boogie woogie version, and track 8 is Herbie Hancock.

Handy continued to write and publish music. In 1937 his first wife, Elizabeth, died. He had vision problems throughout his life. In 1943 he lost his balance and fell at a subway station, becoming totally blind. In 1954, at the age of 80, he married his second wife, Irma. The following year, he suffered a stroke and was confined to a wheelchair. He died on March 28, 1958, of acute bronchial pneumonia.

W.C. Handy took the basic African-American feelings in music and created a new art form – the blues. Our artist today, took some known objects and a known media and created a new art form called Pop Art.