

William Christopher W.C. Handy, Bessie Smith and the Birth of Memphis Blues

Essential Question: How did W.C. Handy and Bessie Smith contribute to the growth of the Blues?

William Christopher Handy was born in Florence, Alabama on November 16, 1873. Handy was born with a talent for music. In his 1941, memoir *Father of the Blues*, Handy said that from the age of ten he could identify and remember any sound that came to his ear. He would later reproduce some of those sounds in his music. However, Handy's middle class, religious family did not approve of his interest in music. When Handy brought home a guitar that he had purchased, his father made him return it for a dictionary. Handy wrote that to his parents "becoming a musician would be like selling my soul to the devil."

Handy did become a musician. In 1893 he organized a quartet to play at the Chicago World's Fair. After the fair, Handy worked as a traveling musician for a number of years before taking a teaching job at Alabama A&M. Handy soon discovered that teaching did not pay well and in 1896 he joined Mahara's Minstrels. By 1903, he was directing the Colored Knights of Pythias, a group that played for both African American and white audiences.

It was during a performance for a white audience that Handy's musical career began to change. A member of the audience asked Handy to "play some of your own (African American) music". Handy and his group continued playing the popular music they were familiar with, but the crowd was not pleased. Then three local African American men came on stage and played some blues. Handy saw the positive response the blues songs received and considered adding some blues to the group's repertoire. While waiting for a train in Tutwiler, Mississippi in 1903 Handy had another encounter with the blues. An African American musician at the train station was playing his guitar with a knife and singing about going "where the Southern Crosses the Dog." Handy said that "it was the weirdest music I'd ever heard."

Blues are a distinctly African American folk music that developed in the rural south. Like all folk music, blues songs were passed from musician to musician and changed to suit the needs or intentions of the individual artist. Handy's remarkable ear for music and his boyhood training

in musical notation allowed him to transform the songs he heard into sheet music that other musicians could play. Handy did not invent the blues, but he did bring it to the masses.

Handy's first blues hit was written in 1909. Handy was living in Memphis and wrote a campaign song for E.H. Crump, who was running for mayor. The song remained popular even after the election and in 1912 Handy gave the tune new lyrics and published it as "The Memphis Blues." Handy and his partner, Harry Pace operated a music publishing house on Beale Street from 1913-1918. It was during this period that Handy published "St. Louis Blues" which became famous worldwide. In 1918, Handy and Pace moved to New York City. Handy continued to write blues songs, but none were as popular as his earlier hits. In 1931, Memphis honored Handy by creating the W.C. Handy Park on Beale Street. Handy died in New York City on March 28, 1958. The self-proclaimed "Father of the Blues" left behind a musical legacy that can be heard in the works of musicians as diverse as Keith Richards and George Gershwin.

Like W.C. Handy, Bessie Smith was born in Alabama, but she moved to Chattanooga as a young girl. Smith's parents died when she was only nine years old, and she was then raised by an older sister. She soon joined an older brother performing songs in a variety of musical styles including Tin Pan Alley, minstrel tunes, and vaudeville hits. In 1910, Smith met Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, known as the "The Mother of the Blues." Rainey's influence helped Smith develop into one of the most well-known blues singers of all time.

Smith, who is often remembered for her lifestyle, recorded her first song, "Downhearted Blues," in 1923. The record became a hit and was followed by others including "St. Louis Blues" and "Nobody Knows When You are Down and Out." Smith sold out venues in the 1920s and was one of the highest paid African American entertainers of her era, earning one thousand, five hundred dollars a week for a season in Detroit.

The Stock Market Crash and the ensuing Great Depression hurt Smith's career and forced her back to the smaller venues of her early years as a performer. Smith's star was once again on the rise when she died as the result of a traffic accident in Mississippi in 1937.

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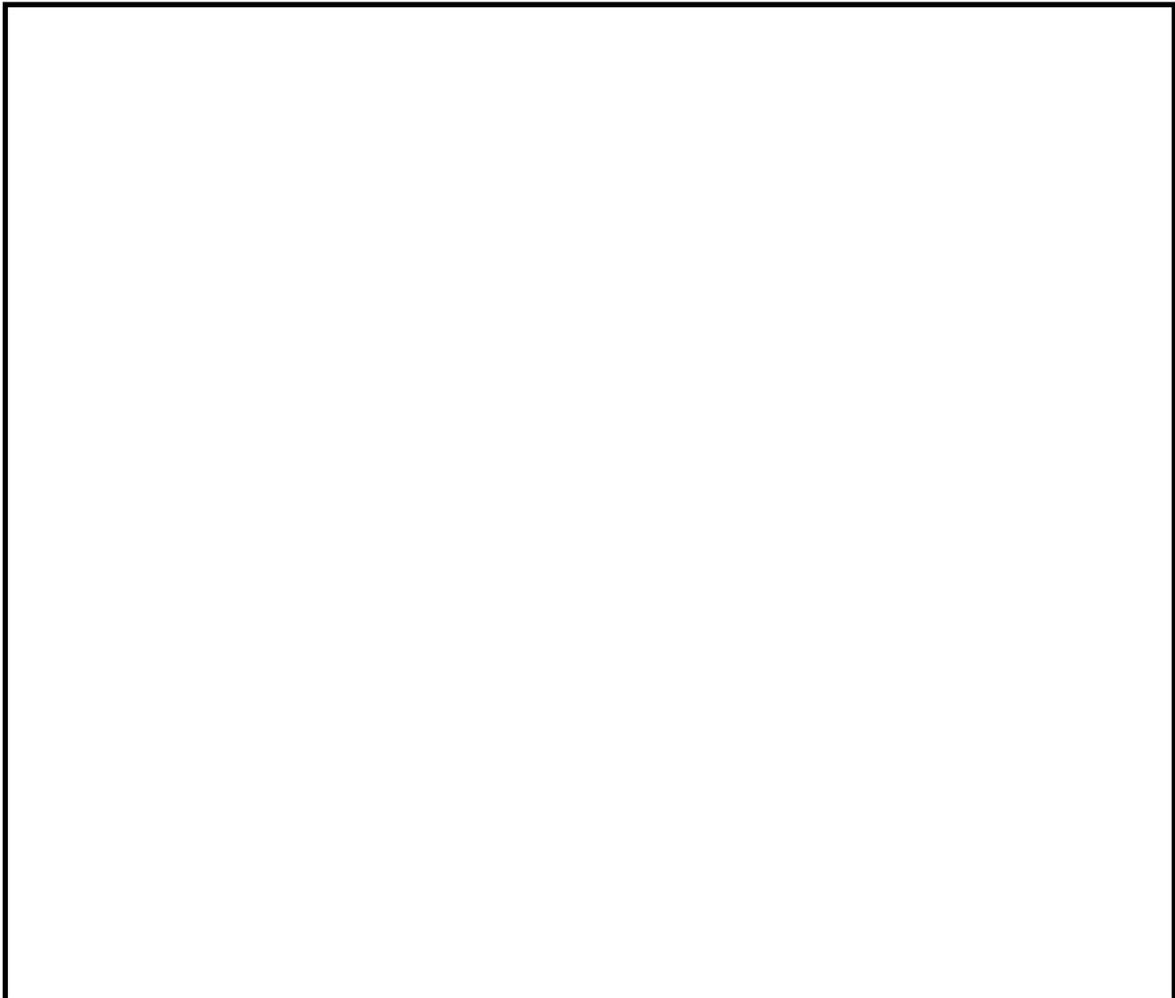
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Create a timeline of what you think are the four most important dates from the text.

Design a newspaper ad for a W.C. Handy or Bessie Smith concert.

A large, empty rectangular box with a black border, intended for the student to design a newspaper advertisement for a W.C. Handy or Bessie Smith concert.