

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

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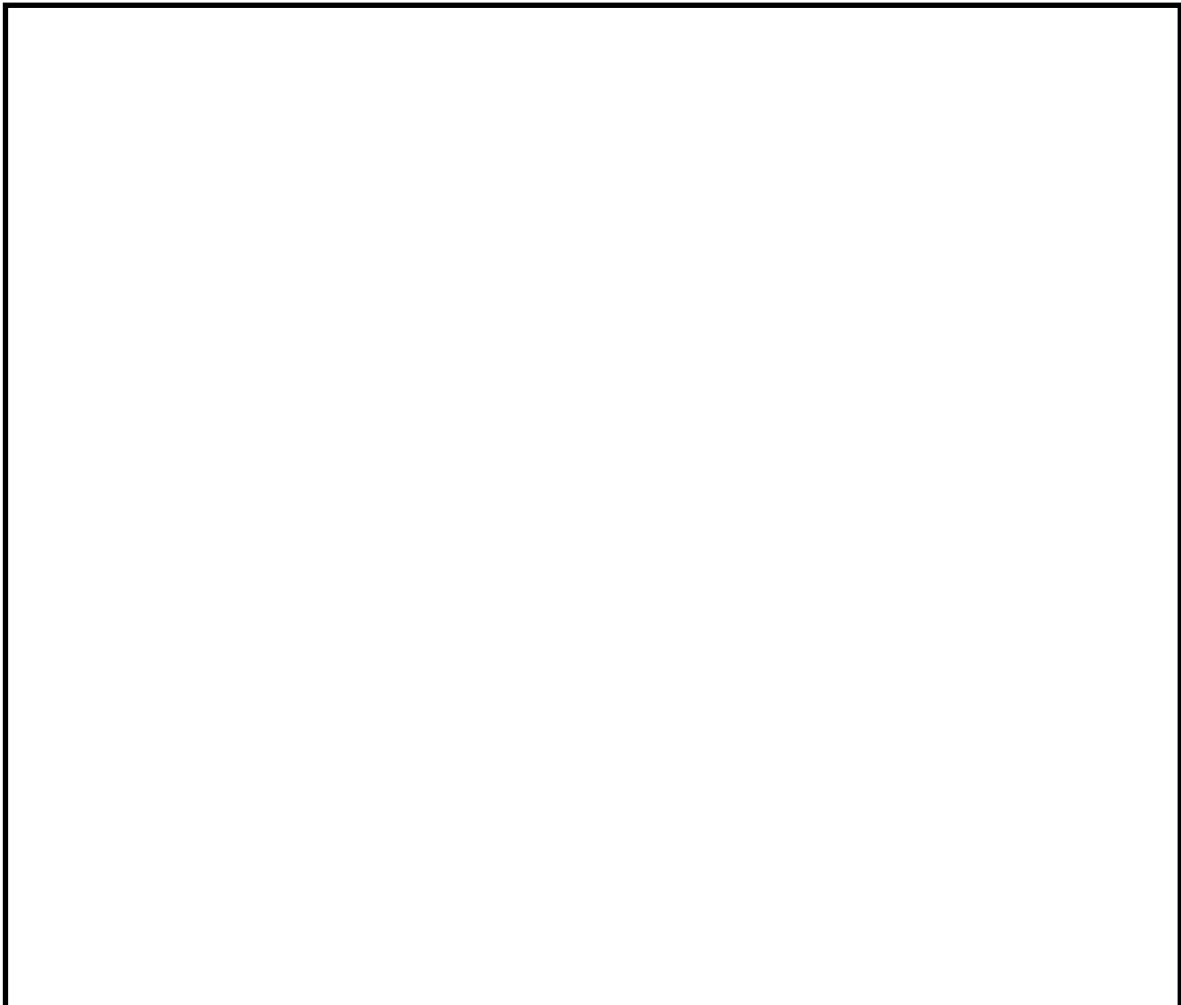
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Create a timeline of what you think are the four most important dates from the text.

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.

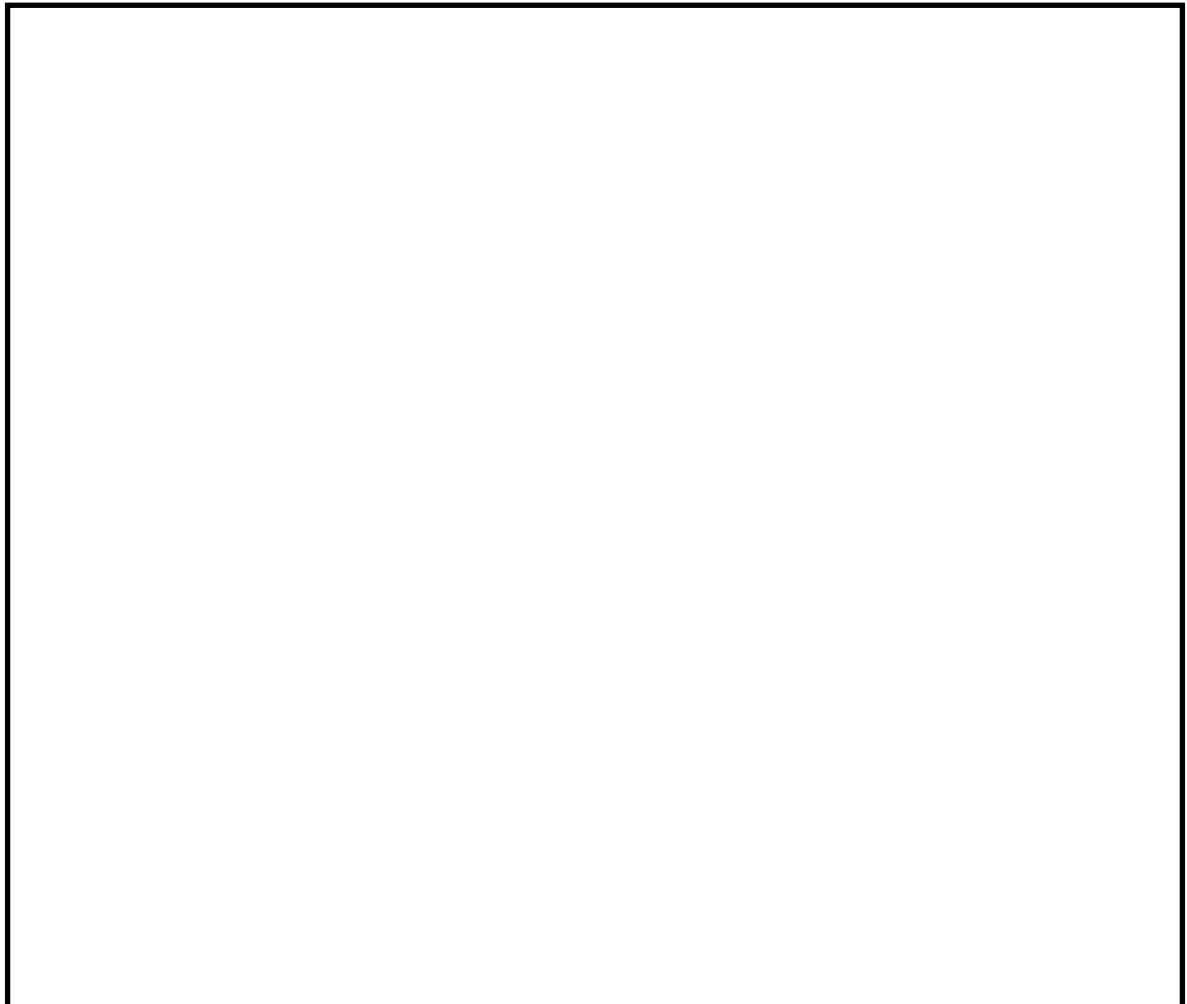
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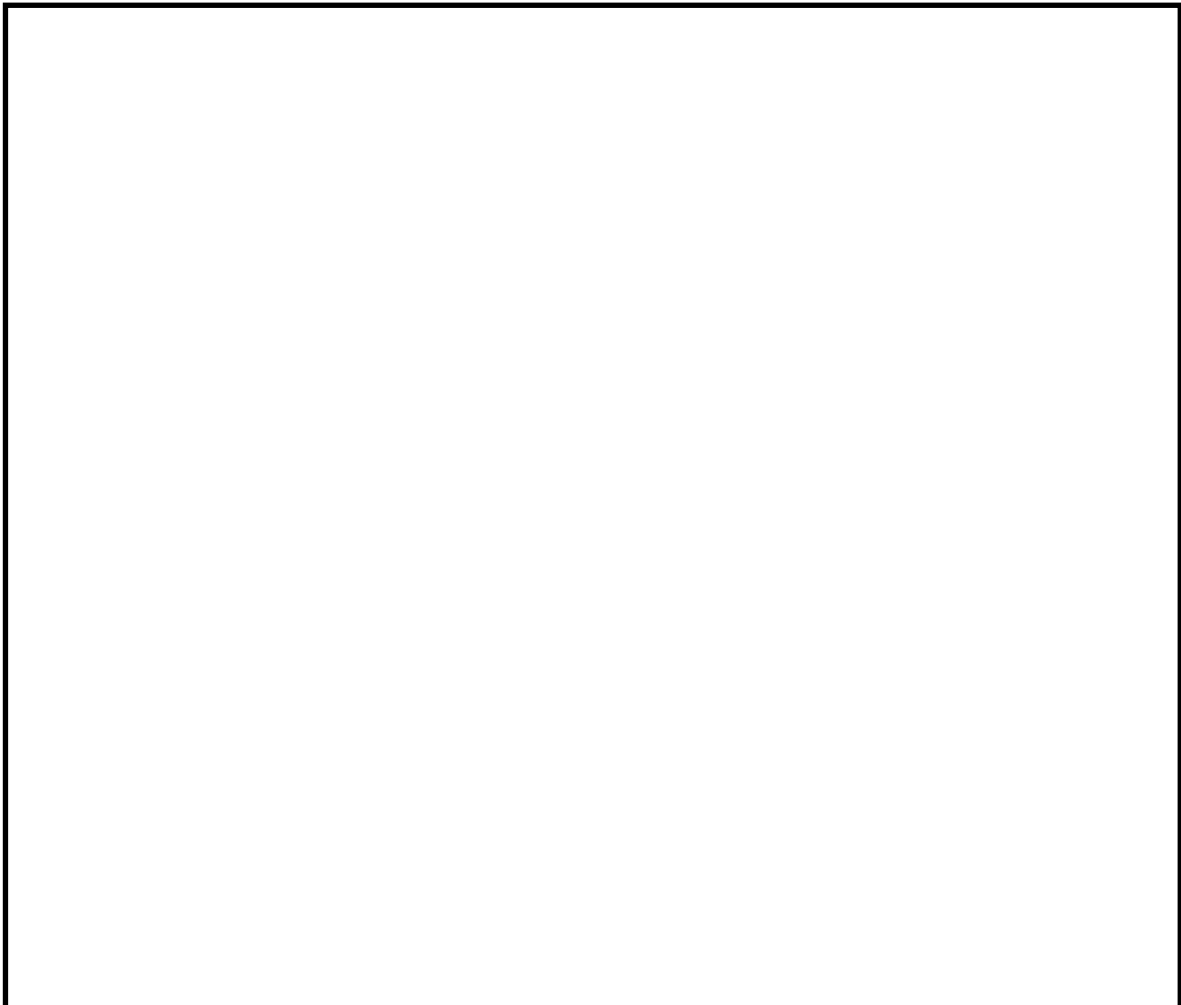
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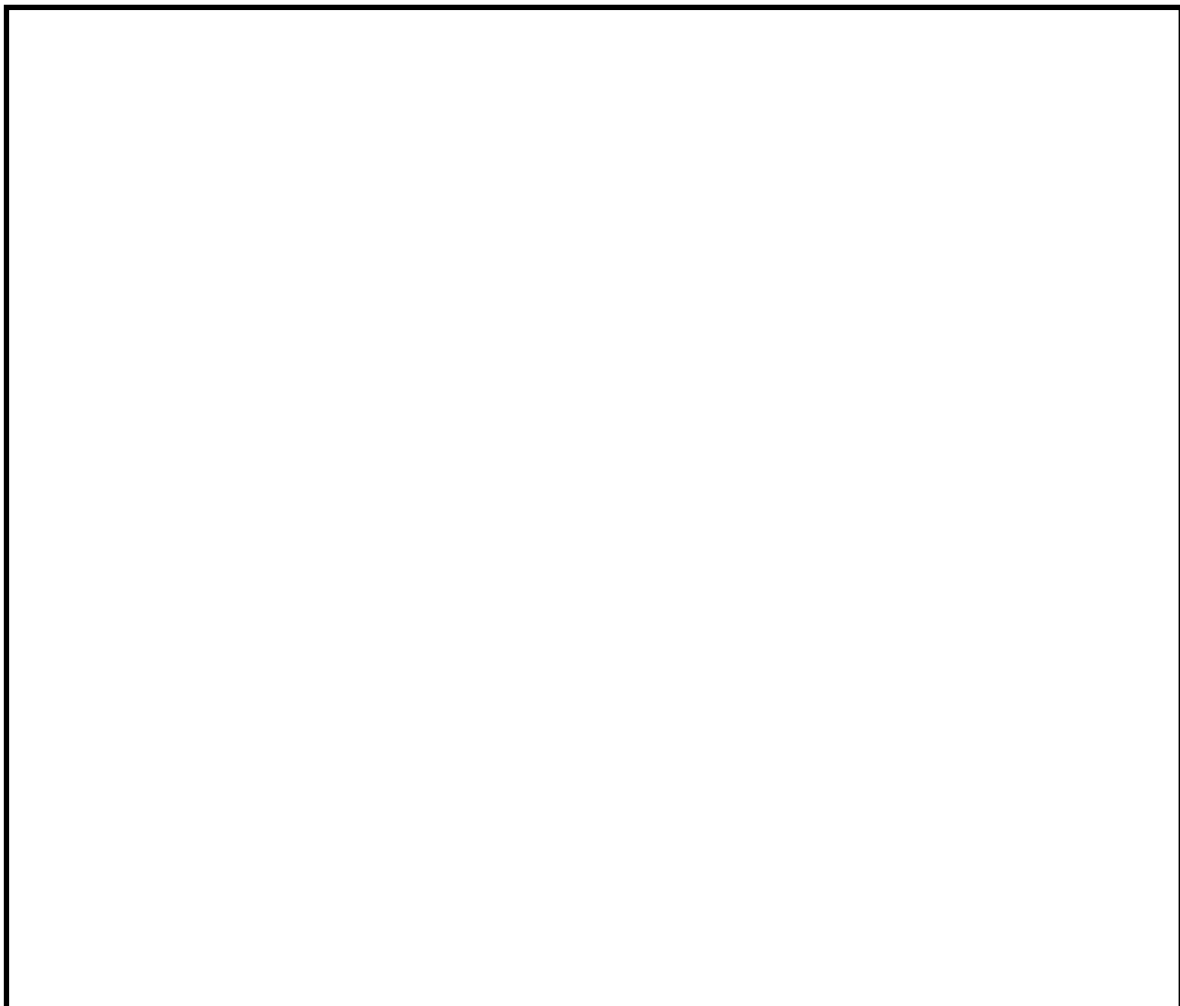
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W.C. Handy Obituary

W. C. Handy, Composer, Is Dead; Author of 'St. Louis Blues,' 84

March 29, 1958

By THE NEW YORK TIMES

W. C. Handy, composer of the jazz classic "St. Louis Blues," died before dawn yesterday at the age of 84. He had been in Sydenham Hospital in Harlem since Sunday with acute bronchial pneumonia.

Mr. Handy suffered a stroke three years ago. Since then he had been able to travel only in a wheelchair. With the exception of a few special occasions, he had been confined to his home at 19 Chester Drive, Yonkers.

At his bedside when Mr. Handy died were his wife, Mrs. Irma Louise Logan Handy, whom he married three years ago; two sons, William C. Handy Jr. and Wyer Handy; a daughter, Mrs. Katherine Lewis; a brother, Charles, and a grandson, William C. Handy 3d.

Mr. and Mrs. Handy had planned to fly to St. Louis on April 7 for the opening of the Paramount film "St. Louis Blues," a fictionalized biography of the composer, and featuring, of course, many of his blues songs. The film will open also in New York and other major cities on the same date.

In announcing Mr. Handy's death, radio stations throughout the country played "St. Louis Blues," "Memphis Blues," "Beale Street Blues" and other of his songs in tribute to him throughout the day.

Honored at Party Here

Mr. Handy's last public appearance was on Nov. 17, 1957, at a birthday party for him in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. More than 800 actors, musicians and public personalities gathered in the Grand Ballroom to hail the "father of the blues."

President Eisenhower, Vice President Richard M. Nixon and Governor Harriman were among the notables who sent telegrams of congratulations. Mayor Wagner proclaimed "W. C. Handy Week" in New York.

William Christopher Handy, son of emancipated slaves, rose from an Alabama log cabin to a Westchester mansion by capturing in song the melancholia of all loneliness and the sadness of his race.

Yet the composer of more than sixty other melodies, was outwardly cheerful, despite blindness during his later years.

Moon-faced and benign, with the deep chest of the trumpet player, the chunky composer was a bit of a philosopher. One day, in his eighties, he told school children how, in his youth, he had slept on cobblestones and Mississippi levees "and heard the roustabouts singing on the steamboats and it hung in my ears." He patted his trumpet and said:

"Life is something like this trumpet. If you don't put anything in it you don't get anything out. And that's the truth."

By then most of his friends were dead and, though the music for "I hate to see that evenin' sun go down" was still in most jazz repertoires, his blues style, so popular for thirty years, seemed to have yielded to new jazz fads.

This did not disturb Mr. Handy's good cheer.

"The Negroes," he said, "invented jazz, and the white folks made an industry out of it."

In a sense politics started the "blues" in 1910. In that year Mr. Handy wrote a campaign song for Edward H. Crump that helped the "Boss" to become Mayor of Memphis. The song became more widely known than the Mayor after it was recorded in 1917 as "Memphis Blues," which described "that melancholy strain, that ever-haunting strain is like a darky's sorrow song."

Mr. Handy was born on Nov. 16, 1873, in Florence Ala. His father and grandfather were Methodist preachers, pastors of the first Negro church in that community.

Describing his early childhood in his autobiography published in 1941 under the title "Father of the Blues," Mr. Handy recalled that his upbringing was rather more strict than that of most of his white contemporaries.

"With all the differences," he wrote, "most of my forebears had one thing in common: if they had any musical talent, it remained buried. My mother admitted a fondness for the guitar, but she could not play it because the church put a taboo on such instruments."

When a small boy, Mr. Handy saved enough money to buy a guitar of his own, but his father ordered him to trade it for a dictionary. At 15, he graduated into a minstrel show from his school singing class, only to return home when the traveling show ran out of money.

His second venture from home, with 20 cents in his pocket, had as its goal the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893. The years following found him alternately employed, penniless, hungry and cold, and in St. Louis he reached his nadir.

"I have tried to forget that first sojourn in St. Louis," he once said. But he must never quite have obliterated it all from his memory, for out of the experience grew "St. Louis Blues." Written in 1914, it set the pattern for hundreds of blues songs.

Upon that melancholy composition a whole new school of popular music writing was based. From its simple, sobbing lyric of frustration grew scores of songs that later were to become the "torch numbers."

Organized Minstrels

Mr. Handy's break into the theatre occurred at the turn of the century. Before that he had eked out his musical education at the Negro Agricultural and Mechanical College near Huntsville, Ala. From this time on he was increasingly successful in organizing orchestras and minstrels and in arranging the popular tunes of the day for minstrel performance.

In 1898 Mr. Handy married his boyhood sweetheart, Elizabeth V. Price. They had six children. She died in 1937. In 1954, when he was 80 years old, Mr. Handy married his secretary.

President and treasurer of the Handy Brothers Music Company, Mr. Handy was a member of the American Federation of Musicians and the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers. He also belonged to the Negro Actors Guild.

Mr. Handy had been totally blind since he fell from a subway station platform in 1943 and suffered a skull fracture. He had lost his sight after World War I, but had partially regained it.

In later years, his works had been performed at the Stadium Concerts here. He was in the audience a few years ago when Louis Armstrong wound up a world tour there by playing "St. Louis Blues."