

WALTER RYAN COLAHAN

INTERVIEW WITH W. C. HANDY

Biography

WILLIAM CHRISTOPHER HANDY WAS BORN IN FLORENCE, ALABAMA, IN NOVEMBER, 1873. HIS FATHER WAS THE LOCAL METHODIST EPISCOPAL MINISTER AND HE BROUGHT HIS SON UP TO FOLLOW IN HIS FOOTSTEPS. BUT W. C. HANDY HAD NO DESIRE TO BE A MINISTER, EARLY IN LIFE HE DECIDED TO BE A MUSICIAN.

HANDY'S FATHER THOUGH MUSIC A COMPLETE WASTE OF TIME AND REFUSED TO CONTRIBUTE AS MUCH AS FIVE DOLLARS TO GET HIS SON STARTED ON A MUSICAL CAREER.

HANDY EVENTUALLY LEFT HOME AND WENT TO BIRMINGHAM WHERE HE TRIED TEACHING SCHOOL FOR A WHILE BUT AS THE SALARY WAS VERY SMALL HE WENT TO WORK IN A TOOL WORKS IN BESSEMER. WHEN THE PANIC OF 1893 CLOSED THE PLANTS HE ORGANIZED A QUARTETTE AND THEY STARTED NORTH VIA FREIGHT CARS TO THE WORLD'S FAIR IN CHICAGO. ARRIVING IN CHICAGO, THEY FOUND THAT THE FAIR HAD BEEN POSTPONED FOR A YEAR. HANDY KNEW HARD TIMES BEFORE HE FINALLY GOT A JOB LAYING BRICKS IN EVANSVILLE, INDIANA. HE PLAYED IN THE EVANSVILLE BAND DURING HIS SPARE TIME AND EVENTUALLY WENT TO HENDERSON, KENTUCKY, TO PLAY IN THE BAND THERE. IT WAS IN HENDERSON THAT HE FIRST LISTENED TO THE SONGS OF THE NEGROES WORKING ON THE LEVEE.

IN 1896 AND 1897, HANDY WAS PLAYING CORNET SOLOS WITH MAHARA'S COLORED MINSTRELS. HE NOTICED WHEN HE PLAYED CLASSICAL PIECES, HE RECEIVED LOUD APPLAUSE FROM THE BOXES AND HISSES FROM THE GALLERY. ONE NIGHT HE PLAYED "GEORGIA CAMPMEETIN'" AND EVERYONE IN THE HOUSE SEEMED TO APPROVE.

THIS STARTED HIM THINKING ABOUT NEGRO MELODIES THAT INCORPORATED THE TOM-TOM BEAT, THE SYNCOPATION, THE HUMOR AND THE DIALECT SO CHARACTERISTIC OF THE NEGRO.

IN 1897 HE RETURNED TO THE SOUTH AND FROM ABOUT 1898 TO 1903 HE TAUGHT MUSIC AT A. & M. COLLEGE AT HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA. IN 1903 HE ORGANIZED AN ORCHESTRA AND STARTED TO TOUR THE SOUTH. IN 1909 HIS ORCHESTRA WAS PLAYING IN MEMPHIS, TENN. WHEN THE MAYORALTY CAMPAIGN OPENED. THE TWO LEADING CANDIDATES IMMEDIATELY SIGNED THE TWO MOST IMPORTANT BANDS IN TOWN TO PLAY NIGHTLY AT THEIR RALLIES. E. C. CRUMP THE REFORM CANDIDATE SIGNED HANDY'S BAND. HANDY SAT DOWN AND DASHED OFF A CAMPAIGN PIECE WHICH HE CALLED "MR. CRUMP!" THE CROWDS WENT WILD OVER THIS PIECE AND SOON EVERYONE IN MEMPHIS WAS SINGING

MR. CRUMP DON'T 'LOW NO EASY RIDERS HERE
MR. CRUMP DON'T 'LOW NO EASY RIDERS HERE
I DON'T CARE WHAT MR. CRUMP DON'T 'LOW
I'M GONNA BAR'L-HOUSE ANYHOW.

SO POPULAR DID THIS PIECE PROVE THAT E. H. CRUMP WAS ELECTED MAYOR AND HANDY'S BAND BECAME THE MOST POPULAR BAND IN TOWN. "MR. CRUMP" WAS LATER PUBLISHED AS "MEMPHIS BLUES."

WITHIN THE NEXT FEW YEARS HE TRIED TO GET A FOOHOLD IN THE EAST BUT IT WAS DIFFICULT FOR A NEGRO BAND - OR PERFORMER - TO OBTAIN BOOKINGS IN THOSE DAYS AND EVEN MORE DIFFICULT FOR A NEGRO COMPOSER TO GET HIS MUSIC PUBLISHED. WHEN HE COMPOSED THE "ST. LOUIS BLUES" IN 1914 NOT ONE WHITE PUBLISHER WAS INTERESTED. THE DIFFICULTIES AND OBSTACLES HE OVERCAME DURING THIS PERIOD OF HIS LIFE NOW SEEM INSURMOUNTABLE. BUT EVERY NEGRO IN THE SOUTH OF THAT DAY HAD THE SAME DIFFICULTIES IF HE WISHED TO MAKE SOMETHING OF HIMSELF. DOLLARS WERE ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE FOR A NEGRO TO COME BY IN THOSE DAYS.

HE EARNED HIS LIVING THE HARD WAY, THEN. AGENTS COLLECTED \$1,000 FOR HIS ORCHESTRA AND HERECEIVED PERHAPS \$200. HE SPENT HIS SPARE TIME

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WRITING SONGS AND RECEIVED LITTLE OR NOTHING FOR THEM, AS EASTERN MUSIC PUBLISHERS WERE NOT INTERESTED IN THE WORKS OF AN UNKNOWN (TO THEM) NEGRO. THE GOOD NEGRO MUSICIANS FREQUENTLY REFUSED TO GO ON THE ROAD, PREFERRING TO STAY NEAR HOME WHERE THEY FIGURED THEY COULD EAT REGULARLY AND KEEP THAT LOVIN' WOMAN.

DURING OUR TALK TODAY, W. C. HANDY SAID: "I RECEIVED VERY LITTLE HELP FROM MEMBERS OF MY OWN RACE. EVERY TIME I WALK INTO MY OFFICE NOW AND LOOK AT THE PICTURES ON THE WALLS I REALIZE MY BUSINESS WOULD HAVE GONE ON THE ROCKS MANY YEARS AGO IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR THE WHITE PERFORMER. I OWE A DEBT OF GRATITUDE TO THE PERFORMERS, WHITE AND COLORED, WHO SANG MY SONGS IN THE EARLY DAYS AND MADE THE PUBLIC AWARE THAT THERE WAS A COMPOSER NAMED HANDY. ALBERTA HUNTER SANG MY "LOVELESS LOVE" AT THE OLD DREAMLAND IN CHICAGO. BLOSSOM SEELEY SANG MY "HESITATING BLUES" AND SOPHIE TUCKER AND MARION HARRIS ALSO SANG MY SONGS. ALBERTA HUNTER INTRODUCED "BEALE STREET BLUES" AND EDDIE GREEN'S "A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND" IN CHICAGO."

BECAUSE OF THE DIFFICULTIES HE ENCOUNTERED GETTING HIS MUSIC PUBLISHED HE FORMED A PUBLISHING PARTNERSHIP WITH HARRY PACE IN ST. LOUIS IN 1913 BUT CONTINUED TO LEAD AN ORCHESTRA. HIS WIFE AND HARRY PACE TRIED TO TALK HIM INTO GOING EAST BUT IT WAS NOT UNTIL HE HAD SOME TROUBLE WITH HIS ORCHESTRA IN THE SOUTH DURING 1917 THAT HE DECIDED TO DROP THE ORCHESTRA AND MOVE TO NEW YORK AS A MUSIC PUBLISHER. "ST. LOUIS BLUES" AND EDDIE GREEN'S "A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND" WERE AMONG THE PARTNERSHIP'S EARLIER SUCCESSES. W. C. HANDY MADE MUCH MONEY WITHIN THE NEXT FEW YEARS. HE MADE OCCASIONAL APPEARANCES WITH OR IN FRONT OF ORCHESTRAS BUT TODAY IS KNOWN AS A COMPOSER-PUBLISHER.

IN APRIL, 1928 HE GAVE AND DIRECTED A CONCERT, "HISTORY OF MUSIC," AT CARNEGIE HALL. HE EMPLOYED ARTISTS OF HIS OWN RACE TO PORTRAY THE DEVELOPEMENT OF NEGRO MUSIC FROM THE DAYS OF RHYTHMS PECULIAR TO THE AFRICANS IMPORTED TO THIS COUNTRY AS SLAVES, TO THE PRESENT DAY SPIRITUALS AND JAZZ.

IN AUGUST 1937, THE ST. LOUIS MUSICAL ASSOCIATION AND THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF NEGRO MUSICIANS GAVE HIM A PLAQUE IN HONOR OF HIS HAVING WRITTEN "ST. LOUIS BLUES."

ON NOVEMBER 21ST, 1938 HE TOOK PART IN A SPECIAL CONCERT OF NEGRO MUSIC AT CARNEGIE HALL TO CELEBRATE HIS 65TH BIRTHDAY. LAST DECEMBER HE APPEARED AT LOEY'S STATE THEATRE ON BROADWAY, AND RECENTLY HE APPEARED AS A GUEST ON SEVERAL RADIO PROGRAMS. DURING 1938 AND 1939 HE HAS SPOKEN TO CHILDREN IN MANY SCHOOLS. LAST YEAR HE GAVE NINETEEN TALKS IN THE HIGH SCHOOLS OF WEST VIRGINIA ALONE.

IN RECENT YEARS W. C. HANDY HAS BEEN WRITING, ARRANGING AND PUBLISHING NEGRO SPIRITUALS AND FOLK TUNES. HE CANNOT UNDERSTAND THE ATTITUDE OF MANY PRESENT-DAY EDUCATED NEGROES TOWARD THE SPIRITUAL. HE BELIEVES THAT THE NEGRO SPIRITUAL COMES FROM DEEP DOWN IN THE SOIL WHERE THE NEGRO LABORED; HIS BLOOD AND HEART AND BONE ARE IN THOSE SONGS AND MELANCHOLY CHANTS. HE FEELS THAT THE WHITE MAN IS NOT ASHAMED OF HIS FOLK SONGS AND SO WHY SHOULD THE NEGRO BE? NEGRO MUSIC CAN'T BE WRITTEN BY WHITE MEN, A WHITE MAN CAN BUILD ON A NEGRO THEME BUT HE CAN'T WRITE ONE.

TODAY W. C. HANDY IS SPENDING MUCH OF HIS TIME TOWARD MAKING THE PUBLIC, (NEGRO AND WHITE), CONSCIOUS OF NEGRO MUSIC, BUT HE ALSO HOPES, ALONG WITH OTHER LEADERS OF HIS RACE, TO MAKE THE NEGRO CONSCIOUS OF HIMSELF AND HIS RACE. DURING OUR INTERVIEW HE HAD, IN PART, THE FOLLOWING TO SAY:

"I, ALONG WITH OTHERS HAVE TRIED TO TALK TO THE PEOPLE OF MY RACE AND CONVINCED THEM OF THEIR OWN STRENGTH, TO IMPRESS UPON THEM THE FACT THAT THEY HAVE WRITERS, SINGERS, MUSICIANS, DOCTORS, LAWYERS AND STATESMEN. EVERY NOW AND THEN I LOOK AT THE NEGRO AND WONDER WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO HIS RACE PRIDE. SOMETIMES I AM AFRAID I TRY TO SHAME THEM."
(SEE THE ATTACHED EDITORIAL FROM THE CHICAGO DEFENDER, "WE BUY BUT DON'T SELL.")

'NEGROES WILL NOT BUY THE BOOKS OR MUSIC OF NEGROES UNTIL THE WHITE HAS PUT A STAMP OF APPROVAL ON IT. LET A WHITE CRITIC ANNOUNCE THAT A NEGRO AUTHOR OR COMPOSER IS GOOD AND THE BOOK STORES OR MUSIC SHOPS WILL NOT BE ABLE TO SUPPLY THE NEGRO DEMAND FOR THAT ARTICLE. I AM AN OLD MAN AND I AM NOT TALKING WITH ANY PERSONAL GAIN IN MIND WHEN I ASK NEGROES TO BELIEVE IN THEIR OWN RACE ENOUGH TO PURCHASE THE LABOR AND PRODUCTS OF THAT RACE.'

'NEGROES GO TO WHITE PHILANTHROPISTS ASKING FOR MONEY TO BUILD SCHOOLS, CHURCHES AND FOR OTHER WORTHY CAUSES, BUT THE DAY WILL COME WHEN THEY WILL BE ASKING THESE SAME MEN FOR MONEY TO BUILD FACTORIES, FACTORIES THAT WILL GIVE NEGROES EMPLOYMENT AT DECENT WAGES. TODAY I AM SURE THAT THE SAME WHITE MAN WHO GIVES SO WILLINGLY FOR A CHURCH OR A SCHOOL WOULD NOT GIVE ONE SINGLE NICKEL TO MAKE THE NEGRO ECONOMICALLY INDEPENDENT. FOR TOMORROW I HAVE HOPES.'

'MY POLITICS ARE OFTEN MISUNDERSTOOD BECAUSE I HAVE CONTRIBUTED OR ENDORSED VARIOUS CAUSES THAT WERE SOMETIMES LABELED RADICAL. I WAS SIMPLY PRACTICING WHAT I PREACH, DOING WHATEVER I COULD IN A SMALL WAY TO BENEFIT MY RACE. IN POLITICS I AM A REPUBLICAN, BECAUSE IT IS THE BUSINESS MAN'S PARTY AND FOR WHAT I THINK IT HAS DONE FOR THE NEGRO, BUT I THINK WHAT THE

DEMOCRATIC PARTY HAS DONE TO THE NEGRO IN THE SOUTH HAS PROBABLY HAD MORE TO DO WITH MY POLITICS THAN I THINK. I DID WHAT I COULD TO HELP THE SCOTTSBORO BOYS BECAUSE I CAME FROM THAT PART OF THE COUNTRY AND I KNOW WHAT THOSE BOYS WERE UP AGAINST. AS TREASURER OF THE NEGRO ACTOR'S GUILD I HAVE TRIED TO HELP THE NEGRO PERFORMER."

"I DON'T BELIEVE IN RELIEF BECAUSE I THINK IT HAS SET THE NEGRO BACK MANY, MANY YEARS. IT HAS FROZEN HIS STANDARD OF LIVING AT A VERY LOW LEVEL AND POSTPONED HIS CHANCES FOR A HIGHER WAGE SCALE TO SOME FAR-DISTANT TIME. I DON'T DISAPPROVE OF THE W. P. A., I JUST SAY THAT THE NEGRO CAN'T GET SOMETHING FOR NOTHING. I DON'T KNOW OF ANYONE WHO EVER REALLY GOT SOMETHING FOR NOTHING."

"I CANNOT FORGET THAT I AM A NEGRO AND AN AMERICAN; A NEGRO AMERICAN."

MR. HANDY BELONGS TO THE FOLLOWING ORGANIZATIONS:

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF MUSICIANS, LOCAL 802
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF NEGRO MUSICIANS
MUSIC PUBLISHERS PROTECTIVE ASSOCIATION
SONG WRITERS PROTECTIVE ASSOCIATION
AMERICAN SOCIETY OF COMPOSERS , AUTHORS AND PUBLISHERS.

BUSINESS FIRMS WITH WHICH HE HAS BEEN OR IS CONNECTED:

PACE & HANDY, W. C. HANDY, HANDY BROTHERS MUSIC COMPANY.

PACE & HANDY, WAS FORMED IN 1913 BY HARRY PACE AND W. C. HANDY, IT WENT OUT OF BUSINESS IN 1921 WHEN HANDY BROTHERS WAS ORGANIZED.

AT VARIOUS TIMES THE FOLLOWING SONGS HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED BY THE FORE-MENTIONED FIRMS:

ST. LOUIS BLUES
MEMPHIS BLUES
BEALE STREET BLUES
HESITATING BLUES
DEEP RIVER BLUES
HARLEM BLUES
ATLANTA BLUES
JOHN HENRY BLUES
THE JOGO BLUES
FLORIDA BLUES
FRIENDLESS BLUES
STINGAREE BLUES
BLIND MAN BLUES
AUNT HAGAR'S CHILDREN *
LOVELESS LOVE
AFRO-AMERICAN HYMN
OH, CAPTAIN, MY CAPTAIN
CARELESS LOVE
THE CHICAGO GOUGE
TRAINS ACOMIN'
LONG GONE
JOE JACOBS
GOIN' TO SEE MY SARAH
LET US CHEER THE WEARY TRAVELLER
MAKE ME A PALLET ON THE FLOOR

* RE-ARRANGED AND PUBLISHED AS A BLUES. *By ANOTHER FIRM*

SOURCES

BEALE STREET, WHERE THE BLUES BEGAN A BOOK BY GEORGE W. LEE
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The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light

This text given by Rev. J. A. Lindsey, St. James A. M. E. Church, Chicago.

WE BUY, BUT DON'T SELL

No race of people which buys all the time and never sells can amount to anything. Every other racial group seeks our community because we are a good market for their wares. They know they are invading a community where the people who constitute it are indolent. The fact that we don't sell keeps us continuously the pauper group of even our own community.

Other people see us all dressed up and think we represent what we appear to be, but the contrary is true. We don't manufacture any of the clothes we wear. We wear fine shoes, but we buy them from other groups. We eat good food but have no stores from which to purchase it. We ride in fine automobiles, but when we have a member of our group representing an automobile concern, we purchase our car from a white agent.

We use thousands of tons of coal, but when we want coal we go to a white concern to buy. How can any race build an economic structure by this method? How can we ever make employment for our boys and girls, unless we establish business places where they will have an opportunity?

We preach everything but race-unity. We don't teach the importance of supporting race enterprises. We don't realize the power of mass expenditure when it points in one direction. We are loud in talking about our rights, but we miss the point in that we don't create any rights.

Educating a lot of boys and girls without making any place for them to be respectably employed is only creating additional dissatisfaction. Most of our university men are railroad porters or dining car waiters. They didn't need Latin and Greek to serve a steak or make down a berth. But what other employment can they get? We have made no jobs for them.

Wealth develops class distinction. Paupers can have no class distinction because they are all alike. Some few families succeed in educating fine, cultured young women. Whom are they going to marry in keeping with their standard of life? All the women don't want to be forced into matrimony with a racketeer in order to eat regularly.

We point to our doctors, lawyers and undertakers as our wealthy people. Now let us analyze this situation: in order for a doctor to become wealthy, the race must be a sick race. In order for the undertaker to become wealthy, the race must be a dying race, and in order for the lawyer to acquire a fortune, the race must be one of two things, either a criminal race, or a rich race.

None of the first three classes do we want to be identified with, and we are not the rich race. Just a little thinking would make us a wealthy race. We must realize that spending all of our money with other races and none with members of our own race, will keep us always poor.

We have got to begin thinking. We laugh too much. There is nothing to laugh at, except our condition, and it's too serious to be funny. There is nothing funny about a group of people who cannot find a grocery store in the community in which they lived owned by them.

We talk about culture and education, but don't show it. What you know is demonstrated by what you accomplish. Cultured people think. We don't. No people who live in numbers running into thousands in communities and have only some unpaid-for churches to show their progress can call themselves cultured and educated.

They can read and write but can't think. We are spending millions in money to educate and furnish employment for other racial groups' sons and daughters while our own walk the streets. Yet we want the world to believe that we are equal to other racial groups. Our conduct belies our contention. Our inferiority is exemplified in our actions.

Yes we buy, but don't sell!

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