

**William Christopher Handy** (November 16, 1873 – March 28, 1958) referred to himself as the **Father of the Blues**. He was one of the most influential songwriters in the United States. One of many musicians who played the distinctively American blues music, he did not create the blues genre but was the first to publish music in the blues form, thereby taking the blues from a regional music style (Delta blues) with a limited audience to a new level of popularity.

He was an educated musician who used elements of folk music in his compositions. He was scrupulous in documenting the sources of his works, which frequently combined stylistic influences from various performers.

In 1893 In Evansville, he joined a successful band that performed throughout neighbouring cities and states. His musical endeavours were varied: he sang first tenor in a minstrel show, worked as a band director, choral director, cornetist, and trumpeter. At the age of 23, he became the bandmaster of Mahara's Colored Minstrels.

In 1902 Handy travelled throughout Mississippi, listening to various styles of popular black music. The state was mostly rural and music was part of the culture, especially in cotton plantations in the Mississippi Delta. Musicians usually played guitar or banjo or, to a much lesser extent, piano. His remarkable memory was such it enabled him to recall and transcribe the music he heard in his travels.

About 1905, while playing a dance in Cleveland, Mississippi, Handy was given a note asking for "our native music". He played an old-time Southern melody but was asked if a local colored band could play a few numbers. Handy assented, and three young men with well-worn instruments began to play.

In his autobiography, Handy described the music they played:

*They struck up one of those over and over strains that seem to have no beginning and certainly no ending at all. The strumming attained a disturbing monotony, but on and on it went, a kind of stuff associated with [sugar] cane rows and levee camps. Thump-thump-thump went their feet on the floor. It was not really annoying or unpleasant. Perhaps "haunting" is the better word.*

In 1909 Handy and his band moved to Memphis, Tennessee, where they played in clubs on Beale Street. "The Memphis Blues" was a campaign song written for Edward Crump, a Memphis mayoral candidate in the 1909 election:

Handy later rewrote the tune and changed its name from "Mr. Crump" to "Memphis Blues."

Handy published several books that although most are not still in print are available ...

- *Unsung Americans Sung* (1944).
- *Blues: An Anthology: Complete Words and Music of 53 Great Songs*,
- *Book of Negro Spirituals*, and
- *Negro Authors and Composers of the United States*

He became blind after an accidental fall from a subway platform in 1943. From 1943 until his death, he lived in Yonkers. After the death of his first wife, he remarried in 1954 when he was 80. His bride was his secretary, Irma Louise Logan, who he frequently said had become his eyes. In 1955, he had a stroke, after which he began to use a wheelchair. More than eight hundred attended his 84th birthday party.

On March 28, 1958, Handy died in New York City. Over 25,000 people attended his funeral in Harlem. Over 150,000 people gathered in the streets near the church to pay their respects.