

William Christopher Handy

Father of the Blues

William Christopher Handy was born in Muscle Shoals, Alabama on November 16, 1873. His father was a Methodist minister and William sang in the church choir and played the organ. His father did not allow him to play any instrument other than the church organ, however he secretly brought a cornet and began playing with the hometown brass band. William walked 125 miles to Birmingham, Alabama to learn more about music. During this time he worked in a steel mill and also taught school.

Will played throughout the South in minstrel and tent shows making notes about the music he heard including the *Delta Guitar*. He would later adapt this music in his own performances. He shifted to the music he had grown up with - spirituals, work songs, folk ballads and jazz and added "*flatted thirds and sevenths*" to what he called *The Blues*.

In 1893 he organized a quartet to play the *Columbian Exposition* in Chicago. W.C. Handy became the director of *Mahara's Minstrels* in 1896. They toured the South playing popular dance, rags and light classical music until the early 1900s. Will finally settled in Memphis, Tennessee in 1908.

In 1911 Will composed and published *Memphis Blues*, the first tune with the word "blues" in it. He followed that song with over sixty other tunes including *Beale Street Blues*, *Ole Miss*, *Yellow Dog Blues* and his immortal *St. Louis Blues* in 1914.

Will and his Memphis Orchestra moved to New York City in 1917 where he started the Handy Record Company, which failed in 1923. Will developed eye problems, (he was nearly blind) during the mid to late 1920s and was unable to keep up his former pace. He continued to do some work, however and recorded sessions with *Red Allen* and *Jelly Roll Morton*.

W.C. Handy's autobiography, *Father of the Blues* was published in 1941 and the movie, *St. Louis Blues* starring *Nat King Cole* was released in 1958. W.C. Handy has park named after him in Memphis, Tennessee and the most prestigious award currently awarded to blues artists is the *W.C. Handy Award*.

W.C. Handy died on March 28, 1958 in New York City.

Sources:

Encyclopedia Britannica

Encyclopedia Africana

Linn's Who's Who on U.S. Stamps