



Smithsonian

National Museum of American History Kenneth E. Behring Center

Guide to the W. C. Handy Collection

NMAH.AC.0132

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title:	W. C. Handy Collection
Date:	1928 1948 - 1948
Identifier:	NMAH.AC.0132
Creator:	Shurr, Robert L. Handy, W. C. (William Christopher), 1873-1958
Extent:	0.3 Cubic feet (1 box)
Language:	English .

Administrative Information

Immediate Source of Acquisition

Collection donated by Robert L. Shurr.

Provenance

Collection transferred to the Archives Center from the Division of Community Life (now the Division of Cultural and Community Life).

Related Archival Materials

Received with George Washington Carver Collection, same donor.

Processing Information

Collection is unprocessed.

Preferred Citation

W. C. Handy Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

Restrictions

Collection is open for research.

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Biographical Note

William Christopher Handy, a composer and music publisher, was born in Florence, Alabama on November 16, 1873. He is known as the "father of the blues" because he was the first person to collect and write the songs down which had been played by workers, illiterates, and share croppers. These original blues songs

had a three line verse, a definite musical pattern which usually expressed a lament of some kind, and often ended in "ironical self -ridicule, fatalistic resignation, or absurd incongruous laughter" He also had a minstrel show band.

Among the more than sixty songs he wrote were "Memphis Blues, St. Louis Blues, Beale Street Blues, Mississippi Blues, and Joe Turner Blues." Handy wrote other secular songs, made arrangements of spirituals, and did orchestral work as a composer and conductor.

To get his music published. Handy, with Harry Pace, a songwriter, founded a music publishing house in Memphis in 1907 which was moved to New York in 1918. Among the songs his company published was "A Good Man is Hard to Find" which Sophie Tucker, a white singer, sang on Broadway and helped to make it a hit.

Handy died on March 29, 1958 in New York City. Later that year a movie based on his life was issued. It was titled "St. Louis Blues" and Nat "King" Cole played the role of Handy.

Scope and Contents

The collection consists of a photograph, several letters written by Handy, and several pieces of music which he published.

Handy remains among the most influential of American Blues songwriters. Handy is credited with giving Blues, its contemporary form. While Handy was not the first to publish music in the blues form, he took the blues from a regional music style with a limited audience to one of the dominant national forces in American music.

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

Arrangement

Divided into 4 series: (1) Correspondence, 1928; (2) Photographs, 1948; (3) Sheet music, 1948; and (4) Robert L. Shurr papers.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- African American composers
- African American music -- 20th century
- Blues (Music)
- Popular music -- Publishing and writing

Types of Materials:

- Correspondence -- 20th century
- Letters (correspondence) -- 1900-1950
- Personal papers
- Photographs -- 1900-1950
- Sheet music

Names:

Pace, Harry (song writer)

Occupations:

Composers -- 20th century

Container Listing

Box 1, Folder 1	Correspondence , 1928 - 1948
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Box 1, Folder 2	Sheet Music , 1935
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Box 1, Folder 3	Photograph, undated
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