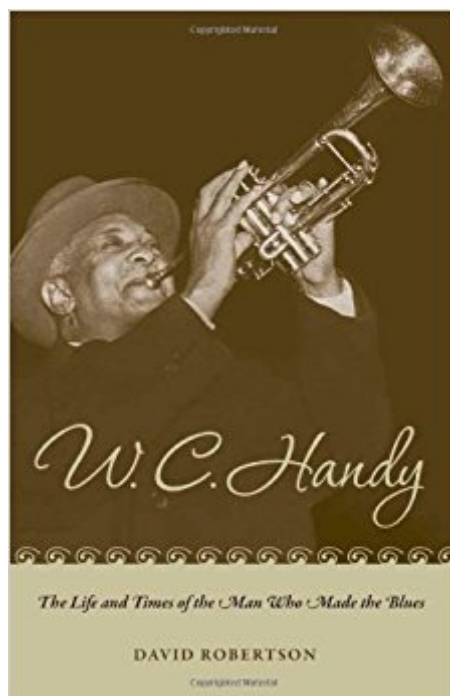


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W. C. Handy: The Life And Times Of The Man Who Made The Blues



Synopsis

David Robertson charts W. C. Handy's rise from a rural-Alabama childhood in the last decades of the nineteenth century to his emergence as one of the most celebrated songwriters of the twentieth century. The child of former slaves, Handy was first inspired by spirituals and folk songs, and his passion for music pushed him to leave home as a teenager, despite opposition from his preacher father. Handy soon found his way to St. Louis, where he spent a winter sleeping on cobblestone docks before lucking into a job with an Indiana brass band. It was in a minstrel show, playing to racially mixed audiences across the country, that he got his first real exposure as a professional musician, but it was in Memphis, where he settled in 1905, that he hit his full stride as a composer. At once a testament to the power of song and a chronicle of race and black music in America, W. C. Handy's life story is in many ways the story of the birth of our country's indigenous culture and a riveting must read for anyone interested in the history of American music.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Robertson . . . casts overdue light on Handy's essential role in establishing the blues as a popular art." —David Hadju, *New York Times Book Review*

"Robertson's work is a fascinating look at not only Handy's life but the history and business of American music." —*Publishers Weekly*

"An overdue and highly readable account of the man known as the Father of the Blues." —*Los Angeles Times*

David Robertson is the author of three previous biographies—of the slave rebel Denmark Vesey, the former U.S. secretary of state James F. Byrnes, and the bishop James A. Pike—and of a historical novel about John Wilkes Booth. His poetry has appeared in the *Sewanee Review* and other journals, and he has provided political and literary commentary to ABC News and the *Washington Post*. He was educated in Alabama and lives in Ohio.

Popular music has hundreds if not thousands of genres, i.e. jazz, blues, rock, soul, hip hop, etc. to name just a few of the biggest musical headings. But just about every kind of pop music today can trace its style back to the music of W. C. Handy, the subject of this excellent biography. Handy's life is a fascinating story of an African-American entertainer struggling to make a living as a professional musician and composer in segregated America at the turn of the 20th century. Music was no longer something only produced in grand opera houses and concert halls. Increasingly in the 1890s and 1900s, vaudeville revues and Broadway shows were adding tunes to America's popular music. But possibly the strongest influence came from the traveling minstrel show. Though the idea of white entertainers pretending to be black is seen now as a symbol of oppression, some minstrel shows employed black musicians and promoted them as the "genuine" negro minstrels. W.C. Handy was a solo cornet player and then a band leader in one of these minstrel bands, and David Robertson has written a sensitive and detailed history of a gifted musician working during this difficult period of American culture. It was very strange to read description of black musicians putting on blackface makeup to pretend to be white musicians pretending to be black. Handy is commonly credited with "inventing" the blues, but Robertson correctly portrays Handy as developing his "blues" from the influence of other black musicians and creating a melodic style that became very popular with the general public, which of course was white. This new blues music had a different purpose than the music composed by other African-American musicians like the blues guitar songs of Robert Johnson or the ragtime piano dances of Scott Joplin. Handy's music was about showbiz and has as much a connection to the marches of John Philip Sousa and the salon music of Louis Moreau Gottschalk as it does to the street musicians of Memphis. The book also goes into detail on Handy's struggle to establish publishing rights over his music in an era when music piracy had a different meaning. Robertson has assembled a wealth of resources and memories on Handy's personal as well as professional life, and the book gives a very complete picture of W.C. Handy as an original composer and accomplished artist who deserves recognition as one of America's great musicians.

Unfortunately Robertson is an unreliable source of information. For instance he creatively claims in the main text that Handy heard the folk song sometimes known as "Hesitation Blues" in 1885. If for some reason you turn to the notes at the back you'll find him admitting that he claimed he heard it in 1885 in the main text because it's "likely" he did, which is a shell game already, but also, it's not likely he did: If you read a good book about the blues such as Peter Muir's *Long Lost Blues* you'll find it suggested that that song dates to more than 20 years after 1885. Handy was inconsistent enough in his memory about which folk song he first heard where in his travels (travels back when he was still rather a self-admitted snob regarding folk music) that we don't need someone adding historical fiction on top of that. This book largely rehashes *Father Of The Blues*, with a resulting main text about 70 pages shorter, leaving out some very good stories. *Father of The Blues*, which Laverne Barber and Arna Bontemps helped Handy assemble, has problems of its own (it's not possible to end up in St. Louis in "'92" because you left Bessemer because of the Panic of '93) but it's much better than this book.

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