

“Memphis Blues”--Victor Military Band (1914)

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Essay by Jon Shain (guest post)*



W.C. Handy

On July 15, 1914, at Victor Talking Machine Company’s studio in Camden, NJ, “The Memphis Blues” became the very first blues song to be recorded.

In his autobiography, the composer himself, W.C. Handy (born William Christopher Handy in Florence, AL, in 1873), details the song’s origins. An African-American born into a deeply religious family, Handy discovered a passion for music early on and became adept at playing, writing, and teaching in the established classical and popular styles. He writes in his book, “I hasten to confess that I took up with low folk forms hesitantly.” So what transpired to cause him to become the self-professed “Father of the Blues”? In 1903, while touring with his group in Cleveland, Mississippi, Handy heard a local folk-blues trio play, and witnessing the crowd’s reaction, became convinced of the music’s inevitable wider commercial appeal. In Handy’s words, “There before the boys lay more money than my nine musicians were being paid for the entire engagement. Then I saw the beauty of primitive music.” He began to mix African-American folk-blues idioms--the chord progressions and blue notes--into the accepted popular music of the day, largely influenced by brass band music like John Philip Sousa’s and ragtime like Scott Joplin’s.

In 1909, he was hired to write a campaign song for Memphis mayoral candidate Edward Crump. This song, “Mr. Crump,” was loosely based on the older song “Mama Don’ ’Low” and actually contained words that lampooned Mr. Crump’s reform movement platform. It is not known whether Crump ever listened to the lyrics, and he later claimed not to have hired Handy himself. Either way, Crump was elected and the song’s popularity took off locally. Handy decided to self-publish the song as an instrumental, and after adding two other sections to it, the song was published as “The Memphis Blues” in 1912. After initial miniscule sales, Handy sold his rights to the song to Theron Bennet, while retaining his authorship credit. Handy asserts in his autobiography that he was taken advantage of and that Bennet knew that a hit was in the making. By the fall of 1913, Bennet had sold fifty thousand copies of the sheet music. And Handy had learned a few important lessons about the music business that led to his eventual historic success as a composer, publisher, and record company owner.

One reason for the success of “The Memphis Blues” was that Bennet had taken the song back to New York, where he convinced the white minstrel show performer George “Honey Boy” Evans to add it to his live act. Edward Cupero arranged “The Memphis Blues” for Evans’ Honey Boy Minstrels to play on the vaudeville circuit (adding new non-Crump related lyrics written by George Norton) and they became the first known act outside of Memphis to perform the song. It is most likely Cupero’s arrangement (minus the vocal) that was used in recording the Victor Military Band’s version.

The Victor Military Band was a subsidiary group of the Victor Co. Players, a collective of session players who were paid by the song. They were employed to record material, sometimes backing up a star talent brought in to Victor’s Camden, NJ studio and sometimes recording on their own. These players were rarely, if ever, credited on the records. This particular session was conducted by Edward “Eddie” King (born 1868 in upstate New York), who led the Victor Military Band and Victor’s orchestra from 1912-1928 and was known additionally as a percussionist with a loud and insistent style. This first recording of “Memphis Blues” features a standard instrumentation of military band instruments (usually trumpet or cornet, trombone, tuba, clarinet, flute) along with a tap-dancing style drum part (perhaps played by King). The Victor ledgers mention “eleven extra men,” so that may be the number of musicians on the cut.

The song consists of three sections each played twice, along with a four bar intro that later shows up as the last four bars of the first section of the tune. This would later become a standard way to begin blues songs. The first 12-bar section follows the standard three-line form of blues songs, but mixes in the IV minor chord and some other chord progression ideas that would seem very non-standard to a player today, and would have been outside the conventions of the folk-blues standard of Handy’s day. His composition does include the customary flatted third and flatted seventh intervals that give it the blues feel. The second section moves into a 16-bar ragtime form in the same key and finishes with a restating of the intro. The third section then modulates to a new key a fourth up from the original key, and back into a twelve bar blues form again, but with slightly different chord changes and a different melody from the first section. “The Memphis Blues” is a far more sophisticated composition than what we would see in later blues music as the genre evolved.

The Victor Military Band’s version of the song, recorded July 15, 1914, was eventually released in October 1914 as matrix B-16505 on a two-sided 10-inch 78 rpm record, with William Pierson’s “Rag-a-muffin Rag” on the other side.

Interestingly, on July 24, 1914, nine days after the Victor session, Prince’s Band (the house band for Columbia Phonograph Company) recorded their own version of the tune, performing at a faster tempo, peppering it with sound effects and fake animal noises, and titling it “The Memphis Blues or Mister Crump.” The Columbia side was released also in October 1914, but the Victor version beat Columbia’s as the very first blues recording by those nine days.

Jon Shain is a veteran singer-songwriter known for his words, his fiery acoustic guitar work, and for combining improvised piedmont blues with bluegrass, swing, and ragtime. He is the 2019 winner of the International Blues Challenge in the solo/duo category. Shain’s album, “Gettin’

Handy with the Blues--A Tribute to the Legacy of W.C.Handy, was published in 2022 by Mel Bay as a book of fingerstyle guitar arrangements. For more info, go to www.jonshain.com

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<https://victorrecords.com/hismastersvoice/2021/3/20/before-the-wrecking-crew-amp-funk-brothers-were-the-victor-co-players>

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