

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

William Christopher (W.C.) Handy

musician, activist

“Life is like a trumpet – if you don’t put anything into it, you don’t get anything out of it.”

Page | 1



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Background Information

Born: November 16, 1873; Death: March 28, 1958

Handy was born in Florence, Alabama to Elizabeth Brewer and Charles Barnard Handy. He recognized his love for music from a young age, but his father was a minister and did not support his son pursuing music as a career. Despite his father wishes, Handy learned to play the organ, the cornet, which is an instrument similar to a trumpet. Handy also sang and participated in vocal lessons at school. He studied at the Teacher’s Agricultural and Mechanical College in Huntsville, Alabama and became a schoolteacher. Handy continued playing music in his free time.¹

Handy’s Resistance

After leaving his hometown, he traveled throughout the Midwest and played music with several groups. He settled in Mississippi in 1903 and worked the Kings of Pythias orchestra from until 1921. Handy also worked on the side writing and arranging music.² He released the first ever blues song “Memphis Blues,” but sold the rights to the song. Unfortunately, he did not receive any money from the success of the song. Learning from his mistake, he opened up his own publishing company with businessman and songwriter Harry Pace called the Pace & Handy Music Company.¹

He began exploring many famous African American melodies such as jazz and folk. Handy included those melodies in his songs and helped establish the blues as a type of music. In 1914, he published his most famous song “The St. Louis Blues”. Handy continued to have a very successful career and became known as the “Father of Blues” before his death in 1958.³

Achievements

Handy was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1970. In 1993, Handy was awarded a Grammy Trustees Award in 1993.³ W.C. Handy’s innovative approach to music helped to bring the blues to wider audiences and led to its popular appeal.

¹ About James Weldon Johnson. (n.d.). Emory University. Retrieved October 20, 2020, from <http://jamesweldonjohnson.emory.edu/home/about/index.html>

² W.C. Handy | Biography, Songs, Books, & Facts. (2020, September 24). Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/W-C-Handy>

³ Wikipedia contributors. (2020b, October 9). W. C. Handy. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W._C._Handy

Essential Questions

1. How did Handy change the music industry? What were challenges he faced?
2. What are two adjectives you would use to describe Handy? How can you be more like him?
3. *“Life is like a trumpet – if you don’t put anything into it, you don’t get anything out of it.”*
 - a. What do you think he means by this?
 - b. What are things you need to work hard at to get something out of it?