"They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me": Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues
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"They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me": Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues

The era of popular blues music was not suddenly set into motion by Mamie Smith’s 1920 recording of “Crazy Blues.” By the time Mamie Smith was allowed to walk into a commercial recording studio, the blues was an American entertainment institution with an abounding legendry and a firmly established father figure. The history of the commercial ascendancy of the blues is partially preserved in sheet music, and although this field has been well plowed, new insights still crop up in the furrows. A more important, but far less explored, platform for the blues’ commercial ascendancy was the African American vaudeville stage, the history of which is embedded in the entertainment columns of black community newspapers. As soon as there was a visible network of black vaudeville theaters in the South, the first identifiable blues pioneers appeared before the footlights. Working through disparate cultural impulses, these self-determined southern vaudevillians gave specific direction to new vernacular forms, including the so-called classic blues heard on the first crashing wave of race recordings.

Blues in its various twentieth-century expressions was shaped by the historical interaction of two separate impulses and the dynamic tension between them, all under the influence of a confounding outside force—commercialization in a racist society. The first impulse was to perpetuate the indigenous musical and cultural practices of the African American folk heritage, which eventually formed the cornerstone of an independent black cultural image. The second, counter-

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ing impulse was to demonstrate mastery of standard Western musical and cultural conventions. Through this impulse came the necessary formalizing structures, without which there could have been no composition, development, dissemination, and widespread popularization of ragtime, blues, and jazz.

Blues and jazz made their popular ascendancy through the door opened by ragtime, as the fruition of in-group musical expressions extending from slavery. Research in African American community newspapers of the early 1890s reveals diverse musical activity in a wide geographic sampling of black communities in every social stratum. This activity generally reflected trends and phenomena in the dominant culture. Vague rumblings of an independent force affecting the music gradually surfaced from deep within the black communities. Eastern Kansas, the land of John Brown and place of refuge for freedmen escaping the increasingly violent white southern reaction to radical reconstruction, appears to have been a primordial breeding ground for such developments. Witness this rather sheepish commentary from the “Literary and Musical” column of the November 17, 1893, edition of the Kansas City American Citizen:

Now as to Kansas City’s musical world we can say but little this week. However, something is to be done this season to maintain interest in this art, for which Kansas City has made herself somewhat noted. We have a number of real professional musicians here, who, so far as talent is concerned, would be creditable to Boston; but it appears that something has diverted the exercise of their powers into channels remote from society’s path. Whether this is due to the proper amount of perseverance in a certain direction, or a lack of a proper appreciation on our part, deponent saith not. But so it is.

Precisely what was diverting Kansas City’s local musicians was spelled out in the April 13, 1895, edition of the Leavenworth Herald: “If the present ‘rag’ craze does not die out pretty soon, every young man in the city will be able to play some kind of a ‘rag’ and then call himself a piano player. At the present rate Leavenworth will soon be a close second to Kansas City as a manufacturer of piano pugilists.”

The emergent “rag craze” was firmly entrenched in neighborhood saloons, of which there were reported to be “thousands” in eastern Kansas during the 1890s. On April 27, 1895, the Topeka Weekly Call announced: “At the next meeting of the Leavenworth city council an ordinance prohibiting piano playing and other music in saloons is to be passed. The ordinance has been drafted by request of the police department. Music in Leavenworth saloons has become an almost indispensable feature.” To the editor of the Leavenworth Herald, the
new music was a reflection of deteriorating social standards: “If you are a crapshooter and a ‘piano pugilist’ in Kansas City, it is a sign that you are a ‘society’ man.”\(^3\)

Of course, piano rags are “semiclassical” in many of their structural formalities, their division by movements or variations, and their well-developed melodies; they may have grown out of neighborhood saloons, but they were also rooted in the culturally bourgeois environment of home parlor entertainment, where ownership and knowledge of the piano were badges of social refinement. The “City Items” column of the *Leavenworth Herald* for August 18, 1894, noted, “It’s a mighty poor colored family that hasn’t got some kind of tin pan called piano nowadays.” It is not hard to imagine how ragtime style could have gravitated from the saloon to the salon and back again.

Although ragtime style was most readily identified with piano players, the 1890s witnessed a similar reorientation within the broad spectrum of community-based singers and players throughout black America. In the face of institutional Jim Crowism, brass bands, string bands, and vocal quartets all began to look inward, less intent on aspiring to outdo white musicians at “the white man’s music” and more eager to explore possibilities latent in folk music themes and vernacular music fashions.

Within the immensely popular black vocal quartet tradition of the 1890s, the litmus test of this new, independent musical sensibility was the “barbershop chord.” Just as any song could be “ragged,” so could it be “barbershopped.” Ostensibly complaining about the “musical slang” of barbershop style, a turn-of-the-century black newspaper critic noted, “The chief aim is to so twist and distort a melody that it can be expressed in so-called ‘minors’ and diminished chords.”\(^4\) A distinctively African American invention,\(^5\) the barbershop chord was well ingrained in the incipient ragtime hotbeds of eastern Kansas by 1894, when the *Leavenworth Herald* casually noted, “Although Emporia [a little town about fifty miles southwest of Leavenworth] has a Haydn club it is not above singing ‘I found a horseshoe,’ with a ‘barber-shop chord’ on the second horseshoe.”\(^6\)

The evolution of this distinctive approach to improvising close harmonies was integral to the crystallization of the famous “blue note.” On the authority of his own early quartet-singing experiences,\(^7\) blues father figure W. C. Handy ventured to define the blue note as a “scooping, swooping, slurring tone,” the product of “a deep-rooted racial groping for distinctive harmonies.”\(^8\) Purveyors of the Western canon warned that barbershop style “violates—at times ruthlessly—the exacting rules and properties of music.”\(^9\) Regardless, black vocal quartets embraced the barbershop chord en masse and made it a cornerstone of vocal ragtime and blues.
Ragtime was popularized in the worldwide musical mainstream during the last four years of the nineteenth century. These were trying times for African Americans, especially in the South, where the white racist backlash from Reconstruction was at its savage zenith. Within the black communities the development of an independent musical sensibility expressed the urge for an effectively self-directed African American cultural life. This did not indicate any sort of yearning for an insular music form outside the purview of the dominant culture; rather, it was an attempt to reconcile cultural aspirations with an expanding black commercial potential in the broader entertainment business.

The two main, intersecting avenues to commercial success in the broader entertainment business were sheet music and the vaudeville stage. Without the requisite institutions in place—publishing companies that looked out for black composers and vaudeville theaters that catered to black performers and audiences—there was little hope for commercial success except in terms dictated by the mainstream, and those terms were decidedly unfavorable to black artists. To realize a fully self-directed black culture, African Americans would have to work out for themselves the measure and direction of their artistic expressions, secure proper credit for their creative output, and retain legal control of opportunities for commercial exploitation and financial reward.

Against this backdrop of contradictions, a trail of blues sensibilities was blazed in popular ragtime sheet music leading up to the blues-publishing explosion of 1912. One conspicuous marker is Antonio Maggio’s “I Got the Blues,” published in New Orleans in 1908 and “Respectfully Dedicated to all those Who have the Blues.” In no way linked to Chris Smith and Elmer Bowman’s 1901 “Colored Complaint” by the same title, Maggio’s simple little piano piece was billed as “An Up-to-Date Rag.” What made it up-to-date was its opening strain in a twelve-bar blues form, a strain that would crop up again in W. C. Handy’s 1913 effort “The Jogo Blues” and his 1914 masterpiece “St. Louis Blues.”

The shared melodic strain in “I Got the Blues,” “Jogo Blues,” and “St. Louis Blues” has been described by the scholar who first made note of it as a “stock commercial blues motive.” This description seems to imply that commercial prospects for blues publishing managed to reach assembly-line proportions during the 1908–14 period. A better bet is that Handy and Maggio were coincidentally attracted to similarly irrepressible “snatches”—Handy’s favorite term—of floating folk melody. Handy claimed to have lifted his variation of the strain from a repetitive chant employed by an A.M.E. preacher in his Florence, Alabama, hometown neighborhood during the early 1890s.
Antonio Maggio’s “I Got the Blues” is the earliest published composition known to link the condition of having the blues to the musical form that would become popularly known as “the blues.” White New Orleans “Dixielander” Johnny Lala remembered Maggio as a local mainstream music instructor. A note on the cover of “I Got the Blues” identifies Maggio’s “Headquarters” as the Cable Piano Company on Canal Street. There is an implication, at least, that the Cable Piano Company functioned as a racial crossroads for New Orleans musicians; its long-time manager, J. V. Dugan, eventually took over the business and renamed it the Dugan Piano Company, and in 1915 the Dugan Piano Company became “Special Agents” for the publication of Clarence Williams’s earliest commercial sheet music efforts.

Another historical landmark of blues in sheet music is “I’m Alabama Bound,” claimed by Alabama-born, New Orleans–based mainstream theater pianist Robert Hoffman. It was originally published in 1909 by Robert Ebberman, a clerk at the D. H. Holmes Department Store on Canal Street. The cover of the original Ebberman edition notes that, although Hoffman adapted it as a “rag time two step,” “I’m Alabama Bound” was also known as “The Alabama Blues” (see fig. 1). The implication is that by 1909 the term blues was known to describe a distinctive folk-musical genre from which Hoffman extracted his melody.

Paul Oliver has noted that “Alabama Bound was one of a song cluster which included Don’t You Leave Me Here and Elder Green’s In Town.” Oliver cites exemplary race recordings of it by Papa Charlie Jackson, Harvey Hull, Charlie Patton, and Henry Thomas, and there are others as well. Jelly Roll Morton claimed to have originated the tune when he “hit Mobile in 1905,” and the relationship of Hoffman’s composition to the blues Morton later recorded as “Don’t You Leave Me Here” is obvious.

“I’m Alabama Bound” was also published in 1909 by the legendary African American concert pianist Blind Boone as one of three melodies constituting “Boone’s Rag Medley No. 2—Strains from Flat Branch.” Robert Hoffman’s version appears to have enjoyed the better measure of commercial success. Shortly after that version’s initial publication, the copyright was transferred to the Music Shop, another Canal Street operation, which put out a new edition with a garish coon-song-style cover illustration. At the end of 1909 Prince’s Band made a commercial recording of it, and in 1910 a vocal edition appeared with lyrics attributed to the Music Shop’s proprietor, John J. Puderer. The lyrics include such blues-ready couplets as:

I’m Alabama bound, I’m Alabama bound,
I’ve tried you out, I’ve got to turn you down.
I done told you, nigger, for to be like me,
Just drink good whiskey, let your cocaine be.25

According to the cover of the vocal edition, Hoffman’s “I’m Alabama Bound” was being “sung with great success” in mainstream vaudeville by the white Rag Trio. By 1910 the title was also turning up in newspaper reports from African American entertainers. On a bill with Ma Rainey at the Belmont Street Theater in Pensacola, Florida, in February 1910, “Watkins and Watkins” were “featuring a new act written by themselves entitled ‘I’m Alabama Bound.’”26 A couple

Figure 1. The cover of the first (1909) sheet music edition of Robert Hoffman’s “I’m Alabama Bound” (Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).
of months later a member of Richard & Pringle's Minstrel Band complained: "We would like to know what to do when a band of fifteen pieces under the leadership of able Fred Simpson renders standard overtures from 'Ili Trovatore,' 'William Tell,' etc., and some admirer of classic music shouts, 'Play us Alabama Bound.' Well, it must be the way of the world." 27

Three years after Robert Hoffman's ragtime arrangement of "The Alabama Blues" appeared on the market, W. C. Handy introduced his first blues composition, "The Memphis Blues." It was one of at least four blues titles published or registered for copyright during the fall of 1912; others were "Baby Seals Blues," "Dallas Blues," and "The Negro Blues." Like the two earlier blues-influenced publications from New Orleans—"I Got the Blues" and "I'm Alabama Bound"—"Dallas Blues" and "The Negro Blues" were claimed by white composers.

"Dallas Blues" was self-published in Oklahoma City as a simple piano score by Hart A. Wand, "Composer of 'Tangoisit' & 'Ready Money.'" 28 Wand grew up in Oklahoma City, where he played violin and "led a little dance orchestra." 29 Although he claimed to have "made up" the melody to "Dallas Blues," he also associated it with a "colored porter" at his father's store who whistled along while he rehearsed it and remarked, "That gives me the blues to go back to Dallas." 30 It may have been through Wand's publication of it that "Dallas Blues" was taken up by African American road-show bands. At an afternoon parade in Springfield, Missouri, during May 1914, the famous Rabbit Foot Minstrels Gold Band played "Poet and Peasant" and then "by special request . . . played the 'Dallas Blues' which set 'em wild. A bystander remarked 'Dey sho do punish dem blues.'" 31

In 1915 a white folklorist published an "African Iliad" comprising thirty-three blues stanzas, each consisting of two rhymed couplets, that he had collected from a singer in Beeville, Texas, as "sung to the tune of 'The Dallas Blues.'" 32 In 1918 a vocal edition of Wand's "Dallas Blues" was published in Chicago. 33 Abbe Niles cited a "beautiful variant" that he had heard "sung by a white American, in an English public house, in 1920" and that he reconstructed in his introduction to W. C. Handy's Blues: An Anthology. Among the verses he recalled were the following:

If de river was whiskey and I was a mallard, I said a
mallard, I mean duck,
If de river was whiskey and I was a mallard duck,
I would dive right down an' never would come up.

Oh, de Mississippi River am so deep an'—so wide
an' deep, an', so deep an' wide, an'—
De Mississippi River am so deep an’ wide
An’ de lights buhn low, on de udder side.34

Niles’s “variant” of “Dallas Blues” is more closely related to “The Negro Blues,” which was registered for copyright on November 9, 1912, as by Le Roy White. Not to be confused with black southern vaudevillian Leroy White, this was Leroy “Lasses” White, a white minstrel performer who later achieved fame on the Grand Ole Opry. On the original manuscript submitted to the copyright office, White noted his association with the Happy Hour Theater in Dallas. The manuscript runs to fifteen verses, a monument to early folk-blues literature:

I’ve got the blues but I’m too mean to, I said mean to, I mean cry.
I’ve got the blues but I’m to mean to cry.
I feel so bad I could lay myself down and die.
The Blues ain’t nothing but a good man feeling, I said feeling, I mean bad,
The blues ain’t nothing but a good man feeling bad.
That’s a feeling that I’ve often had.
When a man gets blue he takes a train and, I said a train and, I mean rides.
When a man gets blue he takes a train and rides.
But when a woman gets blue she hangs her head and cries.
When I leave I’m going to leave on the Cannon, I said cannon, I mean ball.
When I leave I’m going to leave on the cannon ball,
Carries fourteen coaches there ain’t no blinds at all.
There’s a big freight train backed up in the, I said in the, I mean yards,
There’s a big freight train backed up in the yards,
I’m going to see my Baby if I have to ride the rods.
Yonder comes the train coming down the, I said down the, I mean track.
Yonder comes the train coming down the track.
It’s going to take me away but it ain’t going to bring me back.
Honey, don’t you weep and, I said weep and, I mean moan,
Honey, Honey, don’t you weep and moan.
I’m going to build you a house cut out of marble stone.
I cried last night also the night be, I said the night be, I mean before,
I cried last night also the night before.
I raised my hand I took an oath I wouldn’t cry no more.

Honey, Honey when I die don’t you wear no, I said wear no, I mean black.

Honey, Honey when I die don’t you wear no black,
Cause my ghost, it’s going to come sneaking back.

I’m going to lay my head down on some railroad, I said railroad, I mean line.

I’m going to lay my head down on some railroad line.

Let the Santa Fe, satisfy my mind.

My home ain’t here it’s a light house on the, I said on the, I mean sea.

My home ain’t here it’s a lighthouse on the sea.

I’m going back to my used to be.

Wish I had wings like Noah’s, I said Noah’s, I mean dove.

Wish I had wings like Noah’s dove.

Then I’d fly home to the little girl I love.

Wish I’d died when I was, I said young, I mean a kid, I wish I’d died when I was quite young.

Then I wouldn’t have this hard old race to run.

I’ll meet you honey when your heart’s going to ache like I said ache like, I mean mine.

I’ll meet you honey when your heart’s going to ache like mine.

I’ll meet you honey when you can’t change a dime.

People, People, my head ain’t made of, I said made of, I mean bone.

People, People, my head ain’t made of bone,
‘Cause I’ve sang what I have, I’m not a Graphophone.

Obviously Lasses White did not *comprise* these floating verses; for the most part, at least, he had to have *overheard* them, “collected” them in the streets and vaudeville theaters of Dallas’s emerging African American entertainment community. The title of the song identifies, in generic fashion, the original source of the words and music.

Other than by subjecting it to musical notation, Lasses White made no apparent effort to develop “The Negro Blues,” that is, lend it any sort of thematic unity or make it conform to the standing rules of popular song construction. Some of the lyrics must have puzzled white audiences and even Lasses himself. The “lighthouse on the sea” verse, for example, probably evolved as an in-crowd abstraction of black songwriter Gussie L. Davis’s 1886 ballad hit by that title.

About a year after White submitted “The Negro Blues” for copy-
right, it was published—as “Nigger Blues”—through a small outfit in Dallas.\textsuperscript{35} The revised title immortalizes the contradictions inherent to the commercialization of black cultural inventions in a racist society. For this particular exploit, the original fifteen verses were pared to six, one of which had not been included in the prototype:

You can call the blues, you can call the blues, any old thing you please,
You can call the blues any old thing you please,
But the blues ain’t nothing but the doggone heart disease.

In 1916 Lasses White’s “Nigger Blues” was commercially recorded by George O’Connor,\textsuperscript{36} a successful white Washington, D.C., attorney whose musical sideline—Negro dialect humor and song—made him “the favorite White House entertainer of every President from McKinley through Franklin D. Roosevelt.”\textsuperscript{37} O’Connor brought stylistic conventions of 1890s minstrelsy to bear on his twentieth-century recordings, at least a few of which were openly mean-spirited.\textsuperscript{38} Of the thirty-five titles he recorded between 1914 and 1918,\textsuperscript{39} “Nigger Blues” was his best-seller,\textsuperscript{40} and it came closest to the original source of African American humor he professed to delineate.

About a year after O’Connor’s “Nigger Blues” came out, a related recording, labeled “Dallas Blues,” was issued by white vaudeville star Marie Cahill.\textsuperscript{41} Composer credit for the song on this recording was claimed by white vaudevillians Bert and Frank Leighton of Long Island, New York, whose copyright submission was registered on May 23, 1916, simply as “The Blues.” According to the ASCAP Biographical Dictionary, the Leighton brothers were known for their “new versions of traditional songs, blending blues and ragtime.” Most of the titles they claimed—“Ain’t Dat a Shame,” “I Got Mine,” “Casey Jones,” “Steamboat Bill,” “Frankie and Johnny”—are either more commonly considered to be folk songs or are more popularly associated with other composers. To compose “The Blues” the Lightons simply combined the melody of Hart Wand’s “Dallas Blues” with the stuttering effect—“I’m going to leave on the cannon, I said cannon, I mean ball”—of Leroy White’s “Negro Blues.” Their manuscript came to eleven verses, of which Cahill recorded nine. One of the discards is an early document of the well-known “peaches” metaphor:

If you don’t like my peaches, you don’t like my peaches, well, then don’t you shake my tree,
If you don’t like my peaches, don’t you shake my tree.
For I’m a free-stone peach and nothing clings to me.\textsuperscript{42}

Marie Cahill’s recording of “Dallas Blues” is likely the source of that “beautiful variant” Abbe Niles collected in Great Britain in 1920. It
begins with a pseudo-folkloric acknowledgment: “I want to sing to you—all a ‘blues’ song I heard a darkey sing, down in Dallas, Texas.” The recording is echoed—to the extent that two verses, the stuttering effect, and the same “lilting dance time” are shared—in a 1928 race recording inexplicably titled “Banjo Blues,” sung and played on guitar and fiddle by Peg Leg Howell and Eddie Anthony. Other race recordings that utilize the stuttering effect include William Harris’s “Bull Frog Blues” and Lena Wilson’s “Michigan Water Blues.”

The creative process of southern folk-blues song construction was initially guided by the capacity for unrestricted recombination of commonly shared ingredients. Within the tradition ownership of a song might be claimed by demonstrating a singular approach to, or treatment of, otherwise floating verses and phrases. This offered no practical application for commercial composers; “approach” was not a copyrightable commodity.

On the other hand, the unprotected raw material of blues construction was ripe for exploitation. In recounting his early adventures in blues composition, W. C. Handy openly acknowledged his “frequent custom of using a snatch of folk melody in one out of two or three strains of an otherwise original song.” Assessing Handy’s work in a 1917 article entitled “The Negro’s Contribution to American Art,” James Weldon Johnson went even further: “I have spoken of ‘The Memphis Blues’ as a composition. Strictly speaking, it is not a composition. The name of the composer printed on the copies is Handy, who is a negro musician of Memphis; but ‘The Memphis Blues’ is one of those negro songs which, like Topsy, ‘jest grew.’”

One particular environment in which the blues “jest grew” was the network of culturally independent African American vaudeville theaters that started cropping up in the South and Midwest just after the turn of the century. By 1910 almost every black community in every city in the South had a little vaudeville theater. It was nothing more than black commercial entertainment for a black audience, but once this dynamic context was firmly established, the stage was set for a cultural revolution. These little theaters provided the principal platform for the concrete formulation of popular blues and for the subsequent emergence of blues from its rural southern birthplace; a culturally distinctive brand of vaudeville emerged, with the blues as one of its primary components.

The pathbreakers of southern vaudeville were also the cultural outsiders of up-to-date, in-crowd African American folk wit, humor, song, and dance. There were strong generational overtones to this new theatrical movement. Many of its star performers were teenagers, runaways—the toughened urban progeny of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s
humble cabin dwellers. Heirs to the sensitivities and folk idioms of their rural forebears, they were childhood witnesses to, and victims of, the widespread brutality that characterized the turn-of-the-century South. They possessed a driven creativity, the expression of a furious cultural and social rebelliousness that, like so many of the artists themselves, came right off the streets and into the theaters.

The rise of southern vaudeville was candidly portrayed in the entertainment columns of the African American press, especially The Indianapolis Freeman, a nationally distributed paper that catered to black entertainers and featured regular correspondence from various theaters and road shows. Reports from southern theaters started filtering in around 1901, and by 1908 there was evidence of blues in the air. That year at the Lincoln Theater in Knoxville, Tennessee, George Centers and Robert Joplin—Scott Joplin’s brother—sang something called “I’ll Be a Low Down Dog.”52 In 1909 at the Pythian Temple Theater in New Orleans, a certain Joe Simms sang “Don’t Dog Me Around.”53 When Clarence Williams published a version of this same title in 1916, he advertised it as “The Original Blues Song.”54

The earliest known published account of blues singing on a public stage has it coming from the mouth of a ventriloquist’s dummy. Southern vaudevillian John W. F. “Johnnie” Woods grew up in Memphis, where he performed in rough-and-ready theaters such as the Gem and Tick’s Big Vaudeville before 1909.55 That year he toured with the Plant Juice Medicine Company as a “buck and wing dancer, female impersonator and ventriloquist.”56 His “little wooden-headed boy” sang “Trans-mag-ni-fi-can-bam-dam-u-ality.”57 By the spring of 1910 Woods was back on the southern vaudeville routes; particular news from the Airdome Theater in Jacksonville, Florida, was reported in the April 16, 1910, edition of The Freeman:

This is the second week of Prof. Woods, the ventriloquist, with his little doll Henry. This week he set the Airdome wild by making little Henry drunk. Did you ever see a ventriloquist’s figure get intoxicated? Well, it’s rich; it’s great; and Prof. Woods knows how to handle his figure. He uses the “blues” for little Henry in this drunken act. This boy is only twenty-two years old and has a bright future in front of him if he will only stick to it.

After closing in Jacksonville, Johnnie Woods and his blues-singing dummy played five weeks in hometown Memphis.58 By late 1911 they were appearing in the showcase African American theaters of Chicago and Indianapolis; Woods reflected on his apparent success:

I have been pressed by many theater-goers and newspaper writers to write or explain something of how I came to be a ventrilo-
quist. Now, really, I have been studying and wondering the same thing, for when I first noticed that I was possessed with this peculiar power I did not know what it meant, and it was some years later that I saw a Punch and Judy show in a church. I set about at once and produced a similar attraction, and it was not until the colored picture houses began to spring up through the South that I began to earn any money for my work. . . . And when I was landed by a medicine show I thought then I had reached the limit, but later, however, I came in contact with [successful black, northern-based producers and performers] Bob Russell, Marion Brooks and Tim Owsley, who were playing through the South with their stock company, and with a short association with them I have learned that I haven’t begun. 59

When called on to account for Woods’s popularity, The Freeman’s Crown Garden Theater correspondent noted: “He studies the public and consequently has succeeded greatly because he gave what was wanted.” Clearly it was at the insistence of southern vaudeville audiences that the blues, a previously submerged aspect of African American folk culture, ascended the stage to be recognized and more fully elaborated. During the spring of 1912 African American vaudeville veteran Paul Carter submitted the first piece of “antiblues” commentary to appear in The Freeman, laying “blame” for the by-then rampant vaudeville blues phenomenon at the feet of “The Colored Audience”:

The blame for smutty sayings and suggestive dancing in theaters lies with the patrons. There is no class to the vaudeville stage now, and it is getting worse every day. There are a great many acts doing things away out of their line in order to please the patrons and manager. When a performer meets another that has played the theater he intends playing the next week, he will ask how things are over there. This will be the answer: “Oh, they like a little smut, and things with a double meaning. If you don’t put it on you can’t make it there.” He then says to himself, “I guess I’ll have to frame up some junk for that bunch.” He then lays aside his music for his regular opening, and when he gets to the theater for rehearsal he will say to the piano player, “When I come on just play the ‘Blues.’” He opens and starts singing in the wings, “I had a good gal, but the fool laid down and died,” and to hear the audience scream one would think the show was closing with a very funny after-piece. When he gets off after the show the crowd is waiting to greet him. You will hear them say, “There’s that guy; he sure can sing ‘Dem Blues.’” “Did you see him take that ‘trip?’ Boy he’s a cat.” Now on the same bill were
singers of such class as Abbie Mitchell . . . [and] Lizzie Hart, and no one says a word regarding their classy numbers. But just let a soubrette on the bill, that some comedian has taken from home, because she looked good to him, and showed her how to "fall off the log" and sing any old ragtime song, and she will receive a bunch of flowers and a few cards with prominent names of amusement lovers of the town. She then goes big all the week and gets a return date in the house in three weeks' time for a four weeks' run.61

When southern vaudevillians embraced folk-blues concoctions in their stage repertory, the audience shouted loud in recognition; if the southern public was prepared to celebrate the singing of "any old" ragtime or blues song, it was simply celebrating itself—it's own uncompromised pride of identity.

The southern vaudeville movement was a manifestation of cultural and economic self-determination. Consider the vulnerability of a thriving and visible new black entertainment industry in the American South; conditions for African American performers tended to amplify the erratic and volatile circumstances of everyday life in the South. This was a movement with an active intellectual component, calling for thoughtful and calculated action. Perhaps no one addressed that aspect of southern vaudeville more forthrightly than did H. Franklin "Baby" Seals, piano player, all-around comedian and straight man, and composer of what is arguably the earliest published vocal blues song, "Baby Seals Blues."

Through open letters in The Freeman, Baby Seals established himself as a spokesman for the southern entertainer. He realized the enormous creative potential latent in his southern cultural heritage, and he forthrightly defended it and identified himself with it. In response to the initially cold reception that northern theatrical critics gave to blues-ready southern vaudevillians, Seals asked in 1912, "why all this criticism about your own sister and brother performers from the South? . . . They did not come up here to get canceled. . . . So let my brothers and sisters of the North wait until we fall, frost or prove otherwise. Then jump on us with both feet. One race of people on top of us is enough for the present."62

Originally from Mobile, Alabama,63 Seals was touring in southern vaudeville by the spring of 1909, when he was identified as the pianist at the Lyric Theater in Shreveport, Louisiana.64 Based in New Orleans during the early months of 1910, he published his first sheet music hit, a crap-shooting ragtime song called "Shake, Rattle and Roll."65 By the spring of 1910 Seals had made his way to Texas,66 playing in the little roughhouse theaters of Houston and Galveston, he
was said to “put so much juice in your song that you will sing even when you don’t feel like singing.”

Baby Seals’s main competitor in Houston during this time was H. “Kid” Love, who had spent most of 1909 in Memphis. In 1910 Houston’s black entertainment world was centered in two neighboring theaters, the People’s, at 211 Milam Street, and the Palace, just a couple blocks up on the other side of the street, at 514 Milam. Baby Seals was often seen at People’s during 1910, whereas Kid Love played at the Palace. Correspondence from the Palace in the July 16, 1910, edition of The Freeman declared, “Mr. Kid Love is cleaning with his ‘Easton Blues’ on the piano. He is a cat on a piano.” Kid Love’s death in Atlanta in 1913 cut short the life and career of one of the world’s first professional bluesmen.

While sojourning in Texas Baby Seals joined hands with Miss Floyd Fisher, “The Doll of Memphis,” and they headed back east as a team. For nearly five months beginning in November 1910, they ran the Bijou Theater in Greenwood, Mississippi. The question has been raised whether Seals was inspired to write “Baby Seals Blues” during this stay in the Mississippi Delta: “It is tempting to think so, but the direction of influence between rural/folk and urban/theatrical phenomena had been mutual for some time in the Delta already.”

That there was an ongoing history of this mutual influence is irrefutable. However, there is nothing to indicate that Seals’s Greenwood experience inspired him to compose his “Blues.” Seals had already heard and probably played blues in Texas. In Greenwood Seals was compelled to insulate the Bijou Theater from its racially charged Delta surroundings; he built a self-contained theatrical enclave, complete with “nice rooms for my people” on the second floor: “Now they don’t have to go out of the house.” Baby Seals and his band of Bijou “Fun Promoters” probably influenced Greenwood’s musical sons and daughters more than they influenced him.

By the end of 1911 Seals and Fisher had crossed the Mason-Dixon line and conquered the black theaters of Chicago and Harlem. At the Olio Theater in Louisville, Kentucky, during the spring of 1912, they were “living up to their reputation of the past few months. Seals features ‘Blues.’” That fall “Baby Seals Blues” invaded the marketplace. Seals and Fisher sold copies from the stage, and they struck an enterprising arrangement with the editor of The Freeman to use the paper as a base for mail-order distribution. An eye-catching ad in the October 19, 1912, edition invited dealers to “write for special terms. Single copies 15 cents. Address E. C. Knox, care The Freeman” (see fig. 2).

If the “Stage” columns of The Freeman are any indication, “Baby Seals Blues” found special favor with fellow southern vaudevillians.
Figure 2. This advertisement for “Baby Seals Blues” first appeared in the Oct. 19, 1912, edition of The Indianapolis Freeman and ran intermittently through Jan. 10, 1914.
In January 1913 "Daddy Jenkins and Little Creole Pet" were at the Elite Theater in Selma, Alabama, with their accompanist, Jelly Roll Morton: "Little Pet takes the house when she sings 'Please Don't Shake Me Papa, While I'm Gone' and 'Baby Seals Blues.'"78 A few months later at the New Lincoln Theater in Galveston there was a "hailstorm of money caused by Hapel [sic] Edwards and Vivian Wright, putting on one of their clever singing, dancing and talking acts, featuring Baby Seals' 'Blues.'"79 Other southern vaudevillians who featured "Baby Seals Blues" during 1913 included future race recording artists Edna Benbow (Hicks),80 Laura Smith,81 Gonzelle White,82 and Charles Anderson.83

When Baby Seals was inducted into the Order of Elks at Richmond, Virginia, in 1913, he was identified as the "Famous Writer of 'Blues.'"84 In many ways Seals embodied the unprecedented development and upheaval in black entertainment during 1909–13. In that remarkably brief span of time he and his southern "brothers and sisters" managed to rise from the roughneck little theaters of Houston, Greenwood, Mobile, and Memphis to the premier African American vaudeville emporiums of Chicago and New York and to the portals of the white theater establishment. Blues and other timber hewn from rural southern folk culture had served as their battering ram. Had he not died in Anniston, Alabama, on December 29, 1915,85 Baby Seals might have become a contender for the title "Father of the Blues."

In its earliest commercial manifestations, the blues appeared as a transitional mixture of referential jargon and musical riffs derived from folk blues; the twelve-bar AAB structure was not yet a rigid consideration. The stylistic element that appears to have most noticeably distinguished early published blues songs from their up-to-date ragtime cousins was a markedly retarded tempo. Purchasers of the sheet music for "Baby Seals Blues" were advised to play it "Very Slow." W. C. Handy's instructions for playing "The Memphis Blues" indicated "Tempo di Blues," the implication being that everyone already knew that a blues song had to be played "Very Slow." The original sheet music for Hart A. Wand's "Dallas Blues" left no margin for doubt about how a blues tune should be played: "Tempo di Blues. Very Slow."

When "Baby Seals Blues" first appeared on the market in 1912, The Freeman's perceptive Crown Garden Theater correspondent made a point to distinguish it from the generic run of blues songs being performed in black vaudeville: "This song is not the 'Blues' one hears so much of, but is of a clever nature."86 Apparently the critic found it to be more consciously developed than were most blues presentations of the time. The trend toward cleverness and development in blues composition and stage performance was not perceived as a significant break
from folk tradition. When a “delightful little brown skin” named Baby Brown appeared at the Crown Garden during the fall of 1913, the critic noted, “Her last number is the ‘Chineese Blues.’ Not greatly different to the colored folk blues, but they are the blues just the same.”

“Baby Seals Blues” can be seen as a deliberate attempt to reconcile the two historical impulses in African American music, an artful demonstration of the popular saying of the time that the blues was “colored folks’ opera.” References to “colored folks’ opera” appeared in the “Stage” columns of The Freeman throughout 1910–20. Salem Tutt Whitney’s Smart Set Company reported in 1917 that “‘The Weary Blues,’ sung by Moana [Juanita Stinnett] and others, passed right on to opera—regular opera—having the touch of one of Wagner’s compositions. It was the very height of blues singing.” That same year a correspondent for Wooden’s Bon Tons allowed that their “Miss Ethelene Jordan . . . deserves much credit for her rendition of popular and classy numbers and remember, she sings the colored folks opera too (The Blues).” Finally, at the Washington Theater in Indianapolis that year, blues composer and future race recording kingpin Perry Bradford was “successful in his pianologue . . . doing what he calls the colored folks opera.”

There was a long chain of precedents to this notion of “colored folks’ opera.” Certain blackface minstrel productions of the mid-1830s were described as “Ethiopian Operas.” Eventually the concept took on philosophical proportions and a black perspective. In 1893, while serving as head of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City, the famous European composer Antonin Dvořák arrived at this “settled conviction”:

I am now satisfied . . . that the future music of this country must be founded upon what are called the negro melodies. This must be the real foundation of any serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States . . .

These are the folk songs of America and your composers must turn to them. . . . In the negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music.

While the “Dvořák Statement” was emotionally contested by various white American musicians, historians, and critics many African Americans felt that it merely stated the obvious. The same observation had been made over twenty years earlier, when the Fisk Jubilee Singers introduced slave spirituals to the American concert stage. After hearing them sing in January 1872, a New York clergyman pronounced the Jubilee Singers “living representatives of the only true, native school of American music . . . the genuine soul music of the slave cabins.”
With the advent of ragtime, black secular music began to attract a level of intellectual consideration that had previously been reserved for spirituals. "It's a rather curious thing," noted The Freeman of March 24, 1894, "that we needed Dvořák [sic] to tell us what we have known very well during the past 40 years. Negro music is the sweetest music in the world. If you don't believe it, go and see some of the success made by the singing pickaninnies in the various theatres in New York at the present time, to say nothing of the Negro quartets in the 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' shows."

When Dvořák died in 1904, Freeman columnist Sylvester Russell took the opportunity to emphasize the influence of the "Dvořák Statement" on African American composers of popular ragtime music. Russell was condescending, but his point was still valid: "Stepping down now to a lower grade of Negro catchy music; what a promise of encouragement he [Dvořák] has set in Rosamond Johnson, Sidney Perrin, Shepard Edmonds and others of the folk-lore race of American song writers."95

In 1911, as the initial shock waves of blues and jazz were reverberating from southern vaudeville, Sylvester Russell wrote:

Dvořák, the great European composer, who first firmly established the procedure of Negro folk-lore as the only genuine original American music, which he had extracted from the Slavonic melodies of the jubilee and syncopated two-step of the guitar and banjorine, so skillfully used in early stages of buck dancing, was hardly aware that he had handed his name down to posterity sacred to the memory and gratitude of the Negro race in the annals of American musical history. And in Dvořák's contention of the past, the present argument waxes strong, re-enforced by the recent declaration of Signor Giacomo Puccini, grand opera composer in London, England, when he said: "There is no such thing as American music. What they have is Negro music, which is almost the savagery of sound." . . . Puccini's mind had probably wended its way back toward the jungles of Africa. He had probably forgotten that the American Negro, like the Indian, is living in a day when the war cry has ceased and the natives live quiet on the reservation. . . . The only thing that can be said to be savage in the classical development of American (Negro) music, is when composers migrate from the treatment of jubilee, back to the raw dispassionate theory of ragtime lore.96

The "Dvořák Statement" had importance as an inspiration and a prediction. The prediction came to pass in a manner that the European maestro might never have imagined. A new American music that drew its vitality in large part from the sources Dvořák espoused did
arise to guide the world's aesthetic vision through the twentieth century. Nonetheless it was not achieved not through the agency of any sort of presumed-superior, "uplifting" Western classical music but through channels remote from society's path, in the continued development of the folk music by the musical sons and daughters of those who had spawned it. It was in the evolution of popular ragtime, the blues, and jazz that Dvořák's vision of an American national music was realized.

"Colored folks' opera" was black vaudeville's response to the "Dvořák Statement." Its most definitive stage exponent was Charles Anderson, the "yodeler blues singer."\(^97\) Originally from Birmingham, Alabama, Anderson was active in southern vaudeville by 1909, when he surfaced at the Lyric Theater in Memphis.\(^98\) On at least two occasions during 1911—first in Jackson, Mississippi, and then in Birmingham—he shared billings with fellow southern vaudevillian and aspiring blues singer Bessie Smith.\(^99\)

By the summer of 1913 Anderson was performing his trademark combination of blues songs and lullaby yodels. It took a special voice and a keen appreciation of the nature of absurdity to juxtapose these seemingly opposite musical phenomena. To accomplish this feat Anderson costumed as a "colored mammy" and featured "Baby Seals Blues." Under the heading "Charles Anderson, Female Impersonator, Character Actor, Yodler," The Freeman reported:

Charles Anderson does a splendid colored mammy. Everyone likes this creation of his. This kind of portrayal of character does not give offense. This mammy is just a mammy. . . . She does things that are amusing and witty, as many real mammies do.

She gets the blues. Then she puts on Baby Seals' well-known song, making a tremendous hit. The part including the song makes for the best character of the kind seen here.\(^100\)

During the summer of 1916 a critic noted, "Anderson calls the blues, a phase of ragtime, grand opera. If it were grand opera, then he were its Caruso. Perhaps he leads the procession in that kind of singing. Last Saturday night he put the house in motion like a boat at sea, when he put over his own blues creation."\(^101\) A review in 1917 stated simply, "His opera, the blues, wins as usual."\(^102\) In 1923, a full decade after he started singing it on stage, Charles Anderson made a commercial recording of "Baby Seals Blues"—labeled "Sing 'Em Blues"—with piano accompaniment by Eddie Heywood.\(^103\) Capturing the full range of Anderson's folk-operatic tenor voice in a remarkable rendition of the first published vocal blues song, this record survives to demonstrate an unabashedly comical resolution of "high" and "low" art, a positive realization of "colored folks opera."

Another staple of Charles Anderson's early vaudeville blues rep-
ertory that he also later recorded was W. C. Handy’s “St. Louis Blues.” Indeed, Sylvester Russell identified Anderson in the October 31, 1914, issue of The Freeman as the “artist who introduced Handy’s St. Louis Blues,” and this was confirmed by Ethel Waters, who claimed to be the “first woman—and the second person—ever to sing professionally that song”; the first, she said, was “Charles Anderson, a very good female impersonator.” A report from Chicago’s Monogram Theater in 1915 said Anderson’s rendition of “‘St. Louis Blues’ was Southern perfection that others can’t approach.”

With its “tango introduction, breaking abruptly then into a low-down blues,” the “St. Louis Blues” is arguably Handy’s most artfully crafted blues composition. It was also his first blues to be published with lyrics. Handy was determined that the emotions it expressed “were going to be real. Moreover, it was going to be cut in the native blues pattern.” In the tradition of Scott Joplin’s classic rags, Handy’s “St. Louis Blues” represents a logical extension and practical application of the “Dvořák Statement.”

Like Baby F. Seals, W. C. Handy established himself as an intellectual arm of the blues. Unlike Seals, he lived to enjoy wide recognition as a spokesman for the blues, indeed as the “Father of the Blues.” Of course the notion that the blues or any other folk-musical style or form could have been spawned by a single composer is anachronistic at best. Nevertheless Handy’s image as a blues father figure was in place before 1920. When his Memphis Blues Band appeared in concert at the fashionable Manhattan Casino in Harlem during the summer of 1919, The Chicago Defender noted, “W. C. Handy...is well known over the world as the ‘Daddy of the Blues.’”

The related notion that Memphis, Tennessee, is the birthplace and proper ancestral home of the blues was also well ingrained by 1920. It was during 1915 that Handy’s Memphis-based publishing company started advertising itself as the “Home of the Blues.” Hard-earned business acumen and effective self-promotion helped to sustain the upward trajectory of Handy’s professional fortunes over successive decades. Behind these entrepreneurial skills, though, the operative measure of Handy’s success was his ability to bring his recognized “knowledge of the art, science and literature” of music to bear on selected examples of African American folk-musical expression.

In 1918 Handy noticed a statement in a Victor advertisement for spirituals recorded by the Tuskegee Institute Singers: “To the Negro must be given the honor of having originated what is perhaps the most distinctive type of music yet produced in the United States.” In response Handy let it be known that the Pace & Handy Music Publishing Company was also “preserving the characteristic melodies of
these spirituals and adding to our wonderful store of Negro music a modern Orchestration and scoring which gives us a secular style of music all our own and known to the world now as BLUES.”

In a well-circulated article from 1919, Handy pondered “The Significance of the Blues”:

It was Beethoven who said, “Music moves us and we know not why. We feel the tears.” etc. Had he lived in America today he would say, “BLUES music moves our feet and we know not why. We feel no tears.”

“Blues” music was created to chase away gloom. It is of negro origin and must pertain to negro life. There have been many explanations of the word “Blues.” One musician explained to a judge recently that “Blues is Blues.” And to the average mind that is a fair explanation.

I am a Southern negro by birth and environments and it is from the levee camps, the mines, the plantations and other places where the negro laborer works that these snatches of melody originate. The negro laborer does his best work while he sings. I have heard on the Mississippi plantation the negro plowman, after a day’s work which began at sunrise, sing just these little snatches, “Hurry, sundown, let tomorrow come,” which means that he hopes tomorrow will be for him better than today. It is from such sources that I built my “SAINT LOUIS BLUES,” which begins, “I hate to see the evening sun go down.”

The record for driving rivets is held by a negro. It was held years ago by a man called John Henry, who wagered that he could drive more rivets than the compressed air drill and won, but the effort killed him. To this day wherever the negro laborer uses the hammer you will hear him sing:

“This is the hammer that killed John Henry, Killed him dead, killed him dead.”

This melody is a typical “Blues” and it is from such sources that I got my material for my “BLUES.”

Most “Blues” are ambiguous. They are modeled after the Negro spiritual of slave days. The slaves would sing, “Go down, Moses; tell old Pharaoh let my people go.” He had no interest in Pharaoh or Moses, but was thinking about his own freedom. But he dared not sing about himself so he sang of Pharaoh. One man has said, “It is not inconsistent with the constitution of human mind that avails itself of one and the same method of expressing opposite emotions.”

The songs of the slaves represented their sorrows rather than
their joys. Like tears, they were a relief to an aching heart. The sorrow songs of the slaves we call Jubilee melodies. The happy-go-lucky songs of the Southern Negro we call "Blues."  

W. C. Handy was born in 1873 to a stable, socially conservative family in Florence, Alabama, where he learned middle-class values and managed to obtain a well-rounded musical education. He also got some first-hand knowledge of the "levee camps, the mines, the plantations and other places where the negro laborer works"; his early job experiences included a stint on the "shovel brigade" at the McNabb Furnace in Florence.  

Unlike Baby Seals and so many others in the first generation of African American blues composers—including Clarence Williams, Perry Bradford, and Jimmie Cox—W. C. Handy was not a product of the southern vaudeville theater tradition. Some ten to twenty years older than most of his blues-composing contemporaries, Handy came of age in a turn-of-the-century minstrel show. En route with Mahara's Mammoth Minstrels in 1899, he was identified as the secretary of a literary club formed among members of the troupe: "Mr. Handy has been three seasons with this company and has become quite popular as a cornet soloist; due to the 'soul' he puts into all he plays. . . . He is a lover of his race and wishes to do something for it besides adding to the harmony of its characteristic songs."  

Except for the 1900–1901 season, which he spent "teaching in the band, orchestra and vocal music departments at the A. and M. College at Normal, Ala.," Handy was with Mahara's Minstrels from 1897 through 1903, touring not only in the South but throughout the nation and as far as Cuba. As director of Mahara's concert band, Handy conducted his earliest-known experiments with vernacular music. During February 1899 the program of the band's evening concerts included "Ragamuffin Characteristic—Handy." Later that year Handy "added his fantasia, 'At a Georgia Camp-meeting' to his long list of selections. The above piece being Handy's own arrangement; it has plenty of that cake walk stirring qualities about it."  

Frank Mahara acknowledged the other side of Handy's work: "Prof. Handy's concert band of 16 picked soloists is the great feature of this company. . . . The high grade of classical music including that beautiful selection 'The Holy City' places Prof. Handy in my estimation, by all odds the greatest musically educated colored person of to day and on a par with the late Gilmore and Sousa." Mahara depicted Handy as a reformer:  

Of all the races the negro is most musical; but there has been much criticism (from white musicians who expect the Negro to play in forty years what it has taken the white man 2000 years—
yes more—to play) that Negro bands play too uneven, loud and roughly. Prof. Handy is correcting these conditions and after careful study has reached the conclusion that the Negro’s music when he is at himself is sweet, passionate, fervent, but when his worst enemy—strong drink—and that desire to out-do in dress, to be the loudest in conversation get a hold on him then you hear the ‘who but me’ playing so common in our bands.121

When he left Mahara’s Minstrels at the close of the 1902–3 season, Handy had offers to instruct a white municipal band somewhere in Michigan and a Colored Knights of Pythias Band in Clarksdale, Mississippi. He recalled the “Michigan thing” offered more money and opportunity, “Yet, for no good reason that I could express, I turned my face southward and down the road that led inevitably to the blues.”123

Handy’s nine-piece Clarksdale-based Knights of Pythias band was a prejazz territory band doing “yeoman duty in the Delta.”124 In an often-quoted passage from Father of the Blues, Handy recalled a dance one night in Cleveland, Mississippi, where the band was upstaged by a downhome string band whose “over-and-over strains” inspired the patrons to shower them with coins: “Then I saw the beauty of primitive music. . . . Art, in a high-brow sense, was not in my mind. My idea of what constitutes music was changed by the sight of that silver money cascading around the splay feet of a Mississippi string band.”125

In fact art “in a high-brow sense” was a guiding force in Handy’s early experiments with blues composition, and it is at the heart of his claim to the title “Father of the Blues.” An unsigned article in the December 22, 1917, edition of The Freeman said Handy “Gave the Go to the Blues Idea—A Distinct Musical Creation, Which Has Won High Favor”:

Mr. W. C. Handy . . . is known the world over for his success in writing a number that was destined to set everybody dancing or trying to refrain from making an effort to dance. This dance success is The Memphis Blues. But he did more than write a dance. He ushered into musical composition a new FORM. A style to which no man can lay earlier claim—the BLUES style. At first his numbers were rejected by the leading publishers, who did not understand Negro life down South, and now, since he has made his work go, they are trying to imitate.

This should be convincing to the most skeptical that there is merit in the Blues, as he writes. . . .

To understand Handy, you must not be satisfied with the music as played and sung in the cabarets alone. You must buy his
work and play it over and over as you read Dunbar. That is just what the Southern whites did. And when they were convinced that merit was found therein they pressed their convictions wherever they went.

Mr. Handy wants his work looked into more seriously by those of his race who have had the advantages of a musical education. Not viewed by what Liszet [sic] or Wagner did, but by what they would have done if they had been American negroes, living in the times in which we live and suffer.

Around 1907 Handy shifted his base of operation from Clarksdale to Memphis, moving there to instruct the local Colored Knights of Pythias Band. Memphis harbored a long-standing tradition of competitive community-based bands. The city also harbored a deep African American vaudeville tradition. At least three black Memphis theaters—the Rialto, Church’s Auditorium, and Tick’s Tivoli—were active at the turn of the century. In May 1901, as W. C. Handy was preparing to leave his teaching post in Alabama to go back on the road with Mahara’s Minstrels, the Rialto Theater was beginning its “summer season in Ragtime Opera”; its roster included Nettie Lewis, “soubrette instigator of ragtime”; Ed Hill, who played “nothing but ragtime”; Bessie Gilliam, “inimitable in ragtime”; and Ora Criswell, “Memphis’ own ragtime.”

The Rialto Theater’s black manager was Lew Hall, and the musical director was J. Ed Green, another member of the theater’s Chicago contingent. Green would eventually return to Chicago to direct the original Pekin Theater Stock Company. While in Memphis he resided in the Alhambra Hotel at Beale and Hernando Streets and directed the Rialto’s Ragtime Opera Company in “African Princess,” “Uncle Eph’s Dream,” and other basically plotless musical comedies geared to meet the increasing popular demand for what Ernest Hogan termed “vaudevillized minstrelsy.”

In July 1901, after six successful weeks at the Rialto, a faction of
the Ragtime Opera Company was dispatched to the Colored Attraction Park in Birmingham, Alabama, under the direction of Lew Hall. After a month or so Lew Hall’s Rag Time Opera Company returned to Memphis and took up residence at Church’s Auditorium on Beale Street, where Handy would eventually play for “our elite.” Toward the end of the year Lew Hall took stock of his efforts at Church’s Auditorium: “I am satisfied I have done something that no other man of colored has done [sic]. I have created substantially the first of its kind in the United States, a colored vaudeville house, and there is more to follow I think.”

On December 20, 1901, the Tivoli Music Hall was opened at 81 DeSoto Street. Alfred “Tick” Houston was the proprietor, and the manager was J. Ed Green, late of the Rialto. The Tivoli’s early weeks of operation saw the production of the “popular sketches . . . ‘Mr. Johnson Turn Me Loose’ and ‘Mrs. Johnson’s Rent Rag Ball.’” Among the featured singers were Estelle Harris, who “donned male attire” and “made a hit with ‘Zulu Babe,’” and Rosa Payne, late of Mahara’s Minstrels, who “opened a successful engagement singing ‘The Ragtime Millionaire.’”

During a visit to Memphis that lasted from January until March of 1902, well-known Chicago cabareteers Poney Moore and Teenan Jones were frequent callers at the Tivoli Music Hall. They were still in town when J. Ed Green announced, “The Tivoli Music Hall is well established in the city . . . Continuous vaudeville is the attraction.” Around 1905 the Tivoli Music Hall was relocated to the corner of South Fourth and Gayoso Streets, where it became known as Tick’s Big Vaudeville.

By the time W. C. Handy settled in Memphis, an exquisite cultural stew was simmering on the local African American vaudeville scene. Memphis had become a magnet for the restless new generation of southern talent that was shaping the future of American entertainment. By 1909, the year Handy claimed to have worked out the original “musical setting” for “The Memphis Blues,” the city’s black entertainment universe was clustered around two particular street corners in two separate sections of the city. Around the intersection of Main and Market Streets in North Memphis, three theaters were operating within half a block of one another: the Royal Theater occupied 269 North Main, the Gem Theater was at 258 North Main, and the Amuse U was at 253 North Main.

The Royal Theater was in operation from early 1908 until some time in 1911. Until his death in 1910, Jim Kinnane’s father, Tom Kinnane, owned the theater. The house pianist was Alice McQuillen, known as “Teddy Bear” and reputed to be “as large as an elephant. The piano stool had to be made larger, so one was made to order, all
constructed of steel. It was built by the Chickasaw Iron Works. Please don’t blow up, Miss Gasoline.”157 Accompanying her was trap drummer Walter James Reid, a veteran of P. G. Lowery’s Concert Band and brother of Barnum & Bailey Circus sideshow band manager William H. Reid.158 Future race recording artist Trixie Colquitt (Butler) played the Royal, as did Charles Anderson and child dancing wonder Little Cuba Austin,159 who went on to play drums on late-1920s recording sessions with McKinney’s Cotton Pickers, the Chocolate Dandies, and Jean Goldkette.160

The Gem Theater was operating as early as 1908, when the house pianist was Cornelius Taylor, “better known as ‘Old Folks.’”161 One of the Gem’s most noteworthy distinctions was its early association with Memphis’s premier husband-and-wife comedy team, Willie Perry and Susie Johnson, known as Long Willie and Little Lulu (or Lula), the “Too Sweets” (or “Two Sweets”). Willie Too Sweet was the Gem’s stage manager from 1908 until 1910, and Lulu Too Sweet wrote most of the musical farces that he produced during that time.162

The Too Sweets were a highly accomplished, multitalented team. As performers they specialized in comic portrayals of children; apparently this was a genre. In a saucy baby-doll outfit Lulu was the prototypical “baby soubrette,” all childhood innocence one moment and then shamelessly manipulating her audience with a double-entendre blues. To her impish stage persona Willie played “the booby, permitting all sorts of pranks to be played on him. He stands for it all.”163 Their “grotesque” humor was further exaggerated by their contrasting physiques: “The lady member . . . looks to weigh about sixty pounds on the stage and Willie looks like [boxing champion] Jack Johnson.”164

From their excellent vantage point at the Gem Theater, Willie and Lulu Too Sweet were able to observe the ferment of southern vaudeville and the direction it was taking at the turn of the decade. Under Long Willie’s aegis the Gem showcased a wide variety of singing and dancing soubrettes, novelty acts, comedians, and buck dancers. Among these performers were pioneer blues singer-composer Jimmie Cox,165 blues ventriloquist Johnnie Woods, and southern soubrette Floyd Fisher,166 soon to become the professional partner of Baby F. Seals. When the Too Sweets took their Memphis experience north in 1911, an in-crowd critic noted flatly that Willie appeared to have come “direct from the field to the stage.”167

In January 1909 the Amuse U Theater opened its doors across the street from the Gem. Its proprietor was twenty-five-year-old Fred A. Barrasso,168 who proved to be an entrepreneur of a sort that Memphis’s ephemeral black theater world had not seen before. Fred Barrasso had the financial resources and hands-on commitment to estab-
lish an African American vaudeville enterprise with lasting impact
not only in Memphis but throughout the region.

Barrasso’s earliest business experience was probably in connection
with one of his parents’ enterprises. Genoroso and Rosa Barrasso had
immigrated to Memphis from Naples in 1893; it was said that Geno-
roso “had owned considerable property in Italy and brought a large
amount of cash to Memphis with him.”169 “The Barrassos made sev-
eral American investments, including the purchase of “a movie theater
on North Main . . . when movies first came to Memphis.”170 Before
opening the Amuse U Theater, Fred Barrasso was running a saloon
at 146 North Main Street.171

The “musical director of the Amuse U orchestra” was pianist H.
“Kid” Love.172 It was at the Amuse U Theater in February 1909 that
Kid and Gussie Love “celebrated their two years of married life by
giving a party to the performers of the Stroll. There was singing, danc-
ing, good music and plenty of refreshments. Every one had a good
time until time to go to their respective theaters.”173 Five months lat-
er Kid Love was in Houston, Texas, carving his name in blues piano
history.

About a mile across town from Main and Market, another storm
center of vaudeville activity was radiating from the corner of Gay-
oso and South Fourth Streets—just one short block north of Beale, on
the outer fringe of what is presently touted as the “Beale Street His-
toric District.” Between 1908 and 1912 at least five little theaters op-
erated within a two-block radius of this pivotal location: Tick’s Big
Vaudeville, the Dixie Theater, the Lyric, the Pekin, and the Savoy.

Until it closed without warning in the spring of 1909,174 Tick’s Big
Vaudeville was the bright light of the Gayoso Street theater district.
Its “orchestra” was composed of James Osborne, pianist; Joseph Hall,
cornetist; and Harry W. Jefferson, trap drummer.175 During the fall of
1908 Tick’s was mixing its vaudeville with comic one-act “afterpiec-
es” produced by, and often featuring, stage manager Happy John
Goodloe,176 who also did a team act with his wife, Ella. In January
1909 Goodloe and Goodloe staged Happy John’s latest one-act farce,
“Scenes on Beale Street.”177

Because the husband-and-wife comedy team format was so perfect-
ly suited to give the audience what it wanted—confrontational hu-
mor, vernacular dancing, and blues singing—it became southern
vaudeville’s predominant performance vehicle. From the standpoint
of blues history, the most important husband-and-wife team to hold
the boards at Tick’s Big Vaudeville was Kid and Gussie Love. Dur-
ing the fall of 1908 they “left the house in an uproar” singing “Greasy
Greens.”178 Said to be an original composition by Texas vaudevillain
George Centers,179 “Greasy Greens” also turned up in folklorist
Howard Odum’s pioneer field transcriptions of “Negro secular songs” collected in rural Mississippi around 1908, and it found its way to race recordings by Amos “Bumble Bee Slim” Easton and perhaps others.

When Love and Love concluded their engagement at Tick’s in January 1909, they went to the newly opened Lyric Theater, just a block and a half away at 313 1/2 Beale Street—practically next door to Pee Wee’s Saloon, 317 Beale, the “headquarters for musicians” where W. C. Handy recalled hanging out. Unfortunately just a week or so later the Lyric “had to close down . . . on account of the manager not being able to pay his employees and performers,” and within the next few months Tick’s Big Vaudeville followed the Lyric Theater into insolvency.

During the summer of 1909 the Pekin Theater opened for business at 98 South Fourth Street, between Union and Gayoso Streets. Initially it drew most of its staff from performers displaced by the closing of Tick’s Big Vaudeville. Happy John Goodloe was the Pekin’s first stage manager. The pit band featured Ed Walker, pianist; Walter Williams, cornetist; and ex-Tick’s trap drummer Harry Jefferson. On October 26, 1909, the Hi Jerry Barnes Trio opened at the Pekin Theater with Laura Smith as one of its members. This was Laura Smith’s introduction to Memphis, and it was reportedly “nothing but curtain calls.” Although she barely appears in the annals of blues literature, Laura Smith was a true pioneer; when she made her first commercial recordings in 1924, she was backed by more than a decade of professional blues-singing experience.

Following the sudden closure of Tick’s Big Vaudeville, the prime location at South Fourth and Gayoso was acquired by rising theatrical magnate Fred Barrasso, who remodeled the place and opened it in January 1910 as the Savoy Theater. For the “grand opening” he brought in former members of J. Ed Green’s famous Chicago Pekin Stock Company, including Charles Gilpin, J. Francis Mores, and basso John C. Boone, a graduate of Black Patti’s Troubadours. These veteran showmen stayed in Memphis for extended engagements. Gilpin, the future star of Eugene O’Neill’s play The Emperor Jones, became the Savoy’s producer and stage manager, Mores served as chorus director, and J. C. Boone was the business manager.

The Savoy was quick to exert itself as a particular hot spot on the Memphis theater scene, and it ultimately became the flagship of an expanded theatrical empire. By the spring of 1910 Laura Smith, Willie and Lulu Too Sweet, Estelle Harris, and other “southern specialists” had combined with the auspicious Chicago contingent to form the strongest stock company Memphis theatergoers had yet seen.

Estelle Harris became one of the Savoy Theater’s prime luminar-
ies, and she remained consistently in the forefront of female vaudevillians employing the new blues and jazz idioms throughout the decade. At the Savoy in 1911 she was "featuring her new song successes, 'That's My Man' and 'The Blues in the Indian Style.'" When she headed north in 1913, Estelle Harris was singing "If You Don't Like My Peaches, Don't Shake My Tree." When jazz came up for recognition in Chicago in 1916, Estelle Harris was on the front line as "The Sister that Shouts," assisted by her "'Jazz' singers, dancers and players," singing W. Benton Overstreet's "New Dance That Everybody's Talking About," which was published and recorded by at least two African American bands in 1917 as "The 'Jazz' Dance."

In addition to presenting its powerful stock company, the Savoy Theater boasted a five-piece house orchestra under the direction of Estelle Harris's husband, pianist H. P. "Buddy" McGill. A Freeman report from the summer of 1910 noted, "Prof. Buddy McGill is still doing funny stunts on the ivory and taking the house nightly with his overture. . . . His latest stunt on the piano is playing 'Home, Sweet Home' with his left hand and 'Nearer My God to Thee' with his right." In addition to working at the Savoy during this time, McGill became one of the "regulars of the Handy syndicate" of band musicians.

By mid-1910 Savoy Theater proprietor Fred Barrasso had established himself as Memphis's prince of black vaudeville. Setting his sights on regional expansion, Barrasso organized a touring party from his Savoy Stock Company to test the waters for prospective theater locations in outlying cities. The first excursion left Memphis for Vicksburg, Mississippi, in June 1910, precipitating an evocative series of reports to The Freeman.

June 25, 1910:

All is well that ends well. But the package that our manager, F. A. Barrasso, of the Savoy Theater, Memphis, got handed to him by the management of the attraction park in Vicksburg, Miss. was a bird, and the park and theater there is a joke. Why, when the performers saw the dump they thought it was a livery stable, and it looked the part. Well, rehearsal was called at once. The plot was "Back to Memphis by Foot," or "Will We Get Our Money?" Well, we did not get our money, and all that kept us from walking back to Memphis was our manager, who pawned his "socks," which were a swell pair of red cotton hose that he had on for three weeks, to the park manager . . . But at that we made good and to show you just how well our manager thinks of the town, he has made all arrangements to open a first-class house for colored people only in the heart of the town. . . .
Poor Laura ("Little Ginger") Smith sings herself hoarse every night responding to encores.

The Merry Howards—Edward and Nettie—that high class sketch team, are doing nicely, but their Class of work don't go very big in the South, the patrons of the Southern theaters think that all colored performers must be black face artist and do comedy only. They can't see straight, well dressed, high class singing and talking artists. Every male performer must black up and be a dancer, and a female performer must be just a little barrel house to be a scream in the South.

July 2, 1910:

American Theater, Jackson, Miss.—Well, things are still going big with the Barrasso Big Colored Sensation Company. The company was to have left for Memphis on the 25th, but word came to us to hold the boards, as the No. 2 company was a little weak to follow the No. 1 company, so the big noise, No. 1 will have to play Jackson for another week, closing July 2. Likewise the Merry Howards, that versatile sketch team, that was to have closed with the company on June 28, they have re-engaged to Manager Barrasso for several weeks longer.

The management is trying very hard to get a special wire put in to the theater for the Fourth of July, to get the returns from the Jeffries-Johnson battle. If all is well that will be our last night in Jackson, Miss., as the town will not support a summer stock company. The theater is a first-class house in every way, but the people will not turn out. To make the matter plainer, the better class of people are kept away by the tougher element.

What a pity! Miss Laura Smith is still with the company, though very homesick. . . . Miss India Allen received a lovely bouquet over the footlights, and it was so small that the sender wrapped it in a sheet of writing paper, with a note enclosed, which read: "I sho dus lub you, an I lik to met yo dis eben."

The members of the company were out joy riding . . . the other afternoon and spent quite a few hours fishing in Pearl River.

Jackson, Miss., is a swell town to live in after a hard rain.

July 9, 1910:

The Savoy Stock Company No. 1 closed a successful three weeks' engagement at the American Theater here and departed Monday, July 4, for Yazoo City for a three nights' stand.

They will play several towns en route to the home of the Savoy Stock Company, Memphis, Tenn.

The company left a great reputation behind them and will ever be remembered by the people of Jackson as being the best col-
ored show that has played the American Theater in years. That’s going some, with an entire change of program every night for three weeks.

Miss India Allen, Mrs. May Ransom and Mrs. Nettie Howard are the only females now with the company as our leading sou-brette, Miss Laura Smith closed with the road show Saturday night, July 2, and left for Memphis where she can get some ‘ta-toes’ raised in Mississippi. She will be missed very much, as she was the life of the company on and off.

As things turned out, Barrasso’s “Big Sensation Company” played just one week in Yazoo City and then moved by train to Greenville, Mississippi, where Barrasso leased the Royal Palm Theater for the remainder of the summer. He recruited a few new acts, and to round out the show he installed pianist Murray Smith and trap drummer Joe White in the orchestra pit.

Barrasso was attempting to forge a chain of vaudeville theaters and groom a stable of touring parties to occupy them. To this end he secured the talents of experienced producers and performers who could be depended upon to stage the kind of shows the public would support. He brought in John H. Williams and William Benbow, two men with exceptionally broad stage experience and proven ability as performers and producers.

Known as the “Original Blue Steel,” John H. Williams specialized in the comic adaptation of the up-to-date southern folk idioms from which blues was gleaned. He arrived in Memphis in August 1910, following a ten-week engagement in Greenville, South Carolina. Taking the Savoy Theater stage that month, he introduced Baby F. Seals’s premier composition, “Shake, Rattle and Roll.” Over the next few years Williams started featuring blues songs of his own devising, including “The Sanctified Blues” and his signature “Blue Steel Blues.”

William Benbow and his wife, Edna Landry Benbow, arrived at the Savoy on July 27, 1910, following an extended engagement in Oklahoma. William Benbow was a central figure in the ascendancy of southern vaudeville. Born in Montgomery, Alabama, he had been performing in parks, theaters, and tent shows throughout the South since 1899. In 1905 his Old Plantation Minstrels included a ten-piece band from New Orleans. Originally from New Orleans, Edna Landry was Lizzie Miles’s half-sister. After joining hands with Benbow in 1909, she quickly established a place among the first generation of popular blues singers. She would record extensively during the early 1920s under the name Edna Hicks.

On September 24, 1910, Barrasso ran this ad in The Freeman:
Performers wanted for F. A. Barrasso Tri-State Circuit—Savoy Theater, Memphis, Tenn.; American Theater, Jackson, Miss.; Amuse Theater, Vicksburg, Miss.; Royal Palm Theater, Greenville, Miss.—Single acts, sister teams, novelty acts. Can also use two more A 1 producers. Fifteen weeks at the best salary that the South can afford. But you must have the "goods" or there's "nothin' doin'." Good time to follow this. Salary sure. Prize fighters, see Jack Johnson; Boozers, see Carry Nation. I pay all transportation over my circuit after joining. Write or wire. Wardrobe must be A 1. Fred A. Barrasso, Sole Owner and General Mgr. 121 to 123 South Fourth Street, Memphis, Tenn.

The Tri-State Circuit was still gathering momentum when Fred Barrasso died unexpectedly, on June 25, 1911. From a commercial standpoint Barrasso's Tri-State Circuit was not particularly impressive, but it was an important achievement for the African American entertainment and a cultural watershed in the evolution of southern vaudeville and blues. Preceding the often-mentioned Theater Owners's Booking Association (T.O.B.A.) circuit by more than a decade, it was the first attempt to establish a black theater chain or vaudeville booking agency in the South. Reaching out from its hub at the Savoy Theater, Fred Barrasso's Tri-State Circuit was the first outward manifestation of Memphis's identity as the "Home of the Blues."

In *Father of the Blues* W. C. Handy took time to recall some of Beale Street's "blue diamonds in the rough," local street-corner and barroom folk musicians who inspired his blues compositions. However, he conspicuously avoided mentioning the continuous barrage of professional blues-based activity that was ringing from the little vaudeville theaters within earshot of his Beale Street office. If Beale Street really could talk, it would speak not of a single father figure but of a groundswell movement in which commercial possibilities for the blues were explored by a host of aspiring entertainers.

As William Grant Still recalled it, Handy did in fact comb the Gayoso Street theater district for musical "ideas," and his successful outings inspired the "Dean of American Negro Composers" to follow suit:

Back in the days when America became aware of the "Blues," I worked with W. C. Handy in his office on Beale Street in Memphis. This certainly would not seem to be an occupation nor a place where anything of real musical value could be gained. Nor would nearby Gayoso Street, which was then a somewhat disreputable section. But, in searching for musical experiences that might later help me, I found there an undeniable color and a musical atmosphere that stemmed directly from the folk.
Any alert musician could learn something, even in that sordid atmosphere. W. C. Handy listened and learned—and what he learned profited him financially and in other ways in the succeeding years. He, of course, belongs in the popular field of music. But if a popular composer could profit by such contacts with folk music, why couldn’t a serious composer? Instead of having a feeling of condescension, I tried to keep my ears open so I could absorb and make mental notes of things that might be valuable later.212

One southern vaudevillian Handy had to have been aware of and probably went out of his way to see was Butler “String Beans” May, a luminous phantom of primal blues lore. Whereas Baby Seals embodied the purposive intellect of the blues in southern vaudeville, String Beans personified the unadulterated instincts of the blues. Among those who professed to having been directly influenced by him are Jelly Roll Morton,213 Ethel Waters,214 and Butterbeans and Susie.215

Born in Montgomery, Alabama, on August 18, 1894,216 String Beans was the young lion of African American vaudeville. A full-blown star before he turned sixteen, he was the first black star whose professional success in no way depended on approval from the mainstream. By the time of his tragic death in 1917,217 “Beans” was known throughout black America for his streetwise humor, contortive vernacular dancing, and outrageous blues piano playing. One contemporary critic went so far as to call him the “blues master piano player of the world.”218

Beans’s trump card was his utter originality. Eulogizing him in 1917, Salem Tutt Whitney readily conceded, “Many of the funny sayings we hear and laugh at in colored vaudeville found their origin in the angular one’s think tank.”219 It was noted in September 1911 that one of Beans’s compositions, his “new song of ‘High Brown Skin Girl,’ will make a rabbit hug a hound.”220 Over the next few years he was credited with originating, among others, “The Whiskey Blues,”221 “Low Down Jail House Blues,”222 “I Loves My Man Better Than I Loves Myself,”223 and “Hospital Blues.”224

Popularly known as “The Elgin Movements Man,”225 Beans may have also originated the blues metaphor of “Elgin movements (in my hips),” which he was singing as early as 1910226 and which found its way onto numerous race recordings, including Eva Taylor’s 1924 interpretation of “Everybody Loves My Baby”227 and Robert Johnson’s “Walking Blues” from 1936.228

Some time before the end of 1913, String Beans combined his metaphor of “Elgin movements” with the theme of the sinking of the Titanic to produce his irreverent tour de force “Titanic Blues.”229 The following description of Beans performing his “Titanic Blues” is based on
eyewitness testimony from African American teacher and folklorist Willis Laurence James: “As he attacks the piano, Stringbeans’ head starts to nod, his shoulders shake, and his body begins to quiver. Slowly, he sinks to the floor of the stage. Before he submerges, he is executing the Snake Hips... , shouting the blues and, as he hits the deck still playing the piano, performing a horizontal grind which would make today’s rock and roll dancers seem like staid citizens” (see fig. 3).

It seems that W. C. Handy was another eyewitness to this riveting spectacle. Discussing “Titanic songs” in 1928, Abbe Niles brought in

Figure 3. This “penograph” of Butler “String Beans” May, which appeared in the May 16, 1914, edition of The Indianapolis Freeman, was inspired by one of his performances at the Crown Garden Theater.
"a specimen, remembered for me by the Father of the Blues, W. C. Handy, and which used to be sung at the Monogram Theater, Chicago, by ‘String Beans,’ a Negro entertainer of high and odoriferous fame":

\[
\begin{align*}
&I \text{ was on dat great Titanic} \\
&De \text{ night dat she went down;} \\
&Ev’rybody wondered \\
&Why I didn’t drown— \\
&I \text{ had dem Elgin movements in ma hips,} \\
&Twenty years’ guarantee!
\end{align*}
\]

Niles had already identified String Beans as a “blues pioneer.” In his introduction to the first edition of Handy’s *Blues: An Anthology*, he allowed that Beans “would improvise verses to his own blues tunes throughout his turn” at the Monogram. Again, it must have been Handy himself who fed Niles this example:

If any one asks you, has String Beans been along,  
If any one asks you, has String Beans been along,  
Jus’ tell ‘em String Beans been here, done got his, an’ gone.232

The one southern vaudeville act that would have been just about impossible for W. C. Handy or any one else in black Memphis to ignore was that of Willie and Lulu Too Sweet. Not only were they a fixture in the local theaters; the Too Sweets resided at 92 South Fourth Street, just three doors down from the Pekin, in the heart of the district.

As was the case with String Beans, the Too Sweets’ original songs were an especially important element of their appeal. In September 1912, as Handy was going to press with “The Memphis Blues,” the Too Sweets publicly warned that they would “prosecute anyone using our original songs,” including “Mama Don’t Allow No Easy Talking Here’’ (see fig. 4).234 One year later, when they introduced their newest southern vaudeville hit, “I’m So Glad My Mamma Don’t

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Figure 4. This advertisement for Willie and Lulu Too Sweet’s original songs appeared in the Sept. 12, 1912, edition of *The Indianapolis Freeman*, one week before W. C. Handy published his first edition of “The Memphis Blues.”
Know Where I’m At,” the Too Sweets issued a second warning: “Miss Two Sweet has had this song copyrighted in order to keep it from the pirates. She says she will prosecute anyone who sings it. Her other song ‘Mamma Don’t Allow No Easy Talking’ was stolen from her.”

The accusation regarding “Mama Don’t Allow” may well have been specifically aimed at Handy, who allowed that the original lyrics of his “Memphis Blues” were inspired by topical verses heard throughout black Memphis, as they were “sung, impromptu,” during the 1909 mayoral campaign: “Mister Crump don’t allow no easy riders here.”

Although his original 1912 sheet music edition of “The Memphis Blues” informed that it was “better known as ‘Mister Crump,’” Handy did not actually commit the “Mister Crump” refrain to print until the second edition of _Blues: An Anthology_ came out in 1949.

The earliest and most straightforward account of the historical relationship between Handy’s “Memphis Blues” and the folk song “Mister Crump” may be the one given in a 1923 press release heralding the Handy Orchestra’s commercial recordings of that year:

One of the most recent issues by Handy’s orchestra on Okeh records is “Memphis Blues.” . . . “Memphis Blues” was known for two years prior to its publication as “Mr. Crump,” and is well known to all Colored folks in the South. A little song that the Southerners used to sing about, “Mr. Crump don’t ‘low no easy riders, but we don’t care what Mr. Crump don’t ‘low, we’re gonnta Barrel House anyhow,” furnished the theme for its composition by Mr. Handy.

In 1927 “Mr. Crump Don’t Like It” was recorded by country blues singer-guitarist Frank Stokes, who reportedly started playing in the streets and saloons of South Memphis before the turn of the century. During 1909, the year of E. H. Crump’s celebrated mayoral campaign, Frank Stokes, W. C. Handy, and Willie and Lulu “Too Sweet” Perry must have all been familiar faces on Beale Street.

“Mister Crump” was a topical variation of the broader, probably older “Mama Don’t Allow” theme, which also took on a life of its own. During the spring of 1914 Madge Clinton treated black vaudeville audiences in Chicago and St. Louis to “Poper Don’t Want No Easy Talking and Mama Won’t Allow It Here.” Several versions of “Mama Don’t Allow” appeared on race records, starting with Papa Charlie Jackson’s “Mama Don’t Allow It” in 1925 and continuing with efforts by William Harris, Frankie “Half Pint” Jaxon, Washboard Sam, and others. When pianist Charles “Cow Cow” Davenport recorded “Mama Don’t Allow” in 1929, he took the initiative to claim the copyright, and he is now generally considered to be its author.
When white composer-entrepreneur Theron C. Bennett took possession of "The Memphis Blues" from W. C. Handy in 1912, he contracted a mainstream lyricist to give it a storyline. The result was touted on the cover of the sheet music as "George A. Norton’s Song Founded on W. C. Handy’s World Wide ‘Blue’ Note Melody." Published in 1913, it told of going "down to Memphis town" and hearing Handy’s band play "The Memphis Blues":

I seem to hear it yet,
Simply can’t forget
That blue refrain,
There’s nothin’ like the Handy Band
That play’d the Memphis Blues so grand.
Oh them blues.246

Norton’s lyrics proved to be extraordinarily popular. Handy himself was quick to put them to use.247 In southern vaudeville "Memphis magnet" Laura Smith probably sang them at the Park Theater in Dallas during the fall of 1913: "Say, she has the whole town whistling ‘Them Memphis Blues.’"248 Handy recalled the Blanks Sisters, a well-respected African American vaudeville team of the time, singing Norton’s lyrics "all over the country,"249 and a note from Indianapolis’s Crown Garden Theater in 1914 confirms that ‘The Blanks Sisters, Arsceola and Birleanna, . . . feature ‘Amazon Land’ and ‘The Memphis Blues.’ . . . They wore green and gold for the ‘Amazon’ number, then the quick change for “The Memphis Blues” revealed the ladies in satin and lace."250

During July 1914 instrumental recordings of "The Memphis Blues" were issued by both Prince’s Band251 and the Victor Military Band.252 Then, in January 1915, Victor issued a vocal rendition by white minstrel-show performer Morton Harvey, who noted in later years:

Although the orchestra that accompanied me in "The Memphis Blues" was composed of symphonic players, it wasn’t their fault that they didn’t get a “blues” quality into the record. The "Blues" style of singing and playing, which became so familiar later, was just about to be born. Even the dance records of "The Memphis Blues" made during that time were played as straight one-steps. However, there were a few good old-fashioned "trombone smears" in the orchestral effects of my "Memphis Blues" record.253

Harvey could also have apologized for not getting much of a "blues quality" into his reading of George A. Norton’s lyrics. Esther Bigeou sang Norton’s lyrics on her 1921 race recording of "The Memphis Blues,"254 and Louis Armstrong dusted them off in a remarkable interpretation on his 1954 LP release Louis Armstrong Plays W. C. Handy.255
Handy may have lost money by selling off his rights to "The Memphis Blues," but he gained a certain immortality. Norton's lyrical endorsement instantly raised Handy's profile and gave momentum to his decision to establish a publishing company of his own. In *Father of the Blues* Handy recalled Salem Tutt Whitney telling "how he had heard the folks yell in delight after the first four bars and the 'break'" of "Memphis Blues" were played. In 1914 Whitney made this observation in *The Freeman*:

Not many persons outside of Memphis and vicinity may have a personal acquaintance with Mr. Handy, but who has not been moved and thrilled by the peculiar rhythm and minor strains and cadences of the "Memphis Blues." Mr. Handy wrote the "Memphis Blues" just to please the people of Memphis. He sold it. Since then it has brought thousands of dollars to its purchaser. An enviable reputation to Mr. Handy and added publicity to the city of Memphis. . . .

When Mr. Handy wrote the "Memphis Blues" he builted better than he knew. He was censured by many for writing what they claimed was an inferior piece of music and greatly below his standard as a composer. It is a unique composition; having but twelve measures to a strain instead of sixteen. It's rapid increase in popularity everywhere makes it a psychological study and it is bound to become a classic of its kind just as the real Negro compositions of Will Marion Cooke [sic], Scott Joplin and other negro composers who are now considered to be the only real expression of the Negro in music and the only genuine American music.

While appropriately ringing in the "Dvořák Statement," Salem Tutt Whitney's evaluation of "The Memphis Blues" also bore what may be the first published commentary on the twelve-bar structure as a characteristic building block of the blues. Chances are that Handy was more than vaguely aware of how well he "builted" his "Memphis Blues." It was Handy's mission as an artist and composer to "make a classic of its kind."

By late 1913 Handy was a fixture in Memphis, with the Pace and Handy Music Company as his centerpost. *The Freeman* of November 15, 1913, reported, "W. C. Handy of the Pace and Handy Music Company, is at the head of one of the most complete music systems in the South. He is doing the dance work for the best people within a radius of 150 miles around Memphis." An advertisement in that same edition of *The Freeman* introduced Handy's second blues composition, "The Jogo Blues."

"The Jogo Blues" failed to fulfill Handy's hope for a "success to
compensate” for the loss of “The Memphis Blues,” but it did get some play in the commercial mainstream, and it earned him the continued respect of his peers. One week during the spring of 1914 the Rabbit Foot Minstrels “Sundayed at Memphis” and “enjoyed a rare treat in the afternoon, when we all assembled down on the levee to witness an open air concert by the Handey & Bynum Orchestra.” At their next engagement, in Newport, Arkansas, the Rabbit Foot’s Gold Band closed its evening concert “with Beale Ave’s opera, ‘Jogo Blues.’”

Like “The Memphis Blues,” “The Jogo Blues” was published without lyrics. However, it appears to have merited a vocal treatment on the vaudeville stage from Handy’s old Memphis-based songwriting contemporaries and possible adversaries, Willie and Lulu Too Sweet, the original claimants to “Mama Don’t Allow.” When the Too Sweets performed “Jogo Blues” in Philadelphia during the spring of 1914, it was described as a “new composition by Mr. Sweets.” In March 1916 a report from the Douglass Theater in Macon, Georgia, noted:

The Two Sweets are going big with their opening “Jelly Roll Blues.”

Two Sweet himself is an excellent comedian. . . . His parody on, “Keep It Up All the Time,” is indeed good. The closing number, “Jogo Blues,” is a scream.

In spite of Willie Too Sweet’s apparently prolific output, the only song he is known to have published or registered for copyright is “I’m So Glad My Mama Don’t Know Where I’m At.” It first hit the marketplace in 1915; in 1918 the copyright was transferred to Tin Pan Alley publisher Leo Feist, who promoted it through mainstream vaudeville star and recording artist Dolly Connolly. Later that year a recording of it was released by another white vaudeville act, the Farber Sisters.

While “I’m So Glad My Mama Don’t Know Where I’m At” ascended to the mainstream, its author remained behind the curtain, following the black vaudeville routes into the T.O.B.A. era. Meanwhile an advertisement in The Freeman of April 24, 1915, introduced the Pace and Handy Publishing Company’s catchy new slogan: “Home of the Blues.” A few months later Pace and Handy ran an advertisement for “The Bluest Blues ever published by ‘The Home of the Blues’—The Hesitation Blues.” According to oral history gathered in Louisville, Kentucky, “Hesitation Blues” was originally “written by Louisville pianist Thomas ‘Hop’ Hopson and stolen from him, only to be published later by W. C. Handy.” At the same time that Handy’s version was published, another version of “Hesitation Blues” was made available from the Billy Smythe Music Company of Louisville.

Abbe Niles has suggested that W. C. Handy and Billy Smythe were
both inspired by the same folk source. In conversations preparatory to the publication of *Blues: An Anthology*, Niles heard that the Pace and Handy version was originally “played and sung to Handy by a wandering musician” who sang the ubiquitous “If the river was whiskey” verse, as well as one about “Silk stockin’s and’ ruffled drawers / got many a po’ man wearin’ overalls,” a variant of which surfaced in Robert Johnson’s 1937 recording “From Four until Late.”

“Hesitation Blues” may also have circulated in southern vaudeville before hitting the marketplace; at the Dreamland Theater in Waco, Texas, during the early months of 1913, George and Nana Coleman were “featuring their own composition, ‘How Long Must I Wait.’” Both published versions of “Hesitation Blues” were commercially successful. In September 1916 P. G. Lowery’s circus annex band acknowledged it was “featuring another number by Pace and Handy ‘The Hesitation Blues’ and it is quite a hit.” That same month the Victor Military Band recorded the Billy Smythe version. A wide range of interpretations, including parodies and topical adaptations of “Hesitation Blues,” can be heard on 1920s and 1930s race and hill-billy recordings by Sara Martin and Her Jug Band, Fiddlin’ John Carson, and numerous others.

The success of Pace and Handy’s “Home of the Blues” translated into attractive job opportunities for Handy’s Memphis-based stable of bands, and this precipitated an influx of top-flight musicians to Memphis. In May 1915 *The Freeman* reported, “P. I. Jenkins, trombonist, late of A. G. Allen’s Minstrels, is now connected with the Handy and Eckford bands at his home town in Memphis, Tenn., where they sing, talk, play, dance and even dream those ‘Memphis Blues.’” It was also noted that Jasper Taylor “resigned his position as trap drummer for the Booker Washington Theatre, St. Louis, and will leave for Memphis, Tenn., August 2 [1915], to play at the Alaskan Roof Garden with Handy and his band.” A local correspondent summarily noted that “according to the brand of music that we are getting from Memphis, the Tennessee metropolis must have invented blue Monday.”

On the evening of May 12, 1916, Handy presented his number-one band at a special concert in Atlanta, “on the stage where Caruso had sung.” Handy recalled having given Clarence Williams and A. J. Piron a spot on that program: “They...had come to Memphis in the interest of their catalogue, plugging in particular *Brown Skin* and *I Can Beat You Doing What You’re Doing Me*. Williams cut capers with the piano stool and played and sang superbly. Piron contributed his fancy fiddling.” An original product of New Orleans’s rough-and-ready cabaret and vaudeville theater scene, Clarence Williams had gone into partnership with A. J. Piron during the fall of 1915 to form the Williams and Piron Publishing Company; taking off on Pace and
Handy's identity as the "Home of the Blues," they eventually dubbed their operation the "Home of Jazz."282

Handy claimed to have helped Williams and Piron "get a listing with the five-and-ten cent stores, a difficult assignment at that time."283 Advertisements in The Freeman show that by July 1916, both Pace and Handy and Williams and Piron were distributing their products through Woolworth's, Kress, and other dime-store chains.284 Handy attributed much of his early success to this arrangement. He was not the first black composer to cut such a deal; it was noted in February 1913 that southern vaudevillian W. M. Stovall's "own songs . . . 'I Have So Much Troubles' and 'I Know You When You Wasn't' are on sale in the five and ten-cent stores."285 Handy appears to have made the best long-term use of dime-store distribution, however. In 1920 he wrote:

It is not always the publisher who has the finest list who succeeds most, but the one who finds the best market for his product. One of the best markets for music is the Woolworth Stores, which numbers more than a thousand in America, besides many in Europe and Canada.

There are many publishers who can not get their numbers listed with the Woolworth Stores and at one time last year twenty-nine publishers were dropped from the Woolworth lists at the same time, Pace & Handy were allowed to add more numbers to the Woolworth list, and herein reflected the broadness of the manager of the music buying department who never lose an opportunity to converse with Mr. Pace or Mr. Handy, thereby keeping posted as to their output as well as plans for future production, and it is for these reasons that we request the readers of our paper to call for all music published by Pace & Handy at the WOOLWORTH Stores.286

It was intimated during the spring of 1917 that Pace and Handy would relocate to Chicago,287 and by November of that year there was a Pace and Handy office in that city at 4427 Evans Avenue.288 Chicago was the capital of the independent African American entertainment world. Its bustling State Street theater district had been dubbed "Broadway in Dahomey."289 One particular State Street landmark was the Monogram Theater. After Butler "String Beans" May brought the full force of southern vaudeville to bear on the Monogram in 1911,290 it became the particular destination and jumping-off point for down-home vaudevillians in search of golden opportunities above the Mason-Dixon line.

The pianist and musical director of the Monogram Theater was William H. Dorsey. Born in Louisville, Kentucky, around 1878,291 Dors-
ey came to the Monogram in 1908, following several years of apprenticeship in various southern theaters. To supplement his income Dorsey "opened an office at 3159 State Street and went into the business of arranging songs." An advertisement in the November 26, 1910, edition of The Freeman described his full range of services: "Music arranged for piano, band and orchestra. Vaudeville artists in need of music of any description for their acts, can be accommodated with bright and catchy music. Words set to music and music set to words."

Dorsey's "song shop" was immediately successful. One of his first clients was Shelton Brooks, for whom he arranged "Some of These Days." In 1912 Dorsey hired an assistant, H. Alf Kelley, and incorporated as the Chicago Musical Bureau. In 1913 the Chicago Musical Bureau expanded its services to include a musical employment agency through which violinist J. Paul Wyer was "imported" from Pensacola, Florida, to fill a position with Chicago's Lincoln Theater orchestra.

W. C. Handy recalled having hired the same J. Paul Wyer to play in his "original blues band" after meeting him on the levee in Memphis, around 1908. According to Handy it was Wyer's free-spirited interpretations of "Mister Crump" during the 1909 Memphis mayoral campaign that gave birth to the "first jazz break" to appear in a printed score—Handy's original 1912 edition of "The Memphis Blues."

J. Paul Wyer's historic tenure with Handy's Memphis band appears to have been a brief one, wedged between stints in southern vaudeville. A report in The Freeman said that Wyer was the stage manager of Pensacola's Belmont Street Theater during 1908. In October 1909 Wyer and southern vaudeville pioneer Will Benbow announced plans to open a new theater in Pensacola. When heard from again during the spring of 1910, Wyer was at the People's Theater in Houston, Texas, with Benbow's Alabama Chocolate Drops Company.

After Wyer moved to Chicago in 1913, he and H. Alf Kelley started writing songs together. Their first collaborative effort, "The Long Lost Blues," was arranged by Will Dorsey and published by the Chicago Musical Bureau in 1914. Included on the cover was an inset photograph of Ben Harney, by whom the song was said to have been "Successfully Introduced" in mainstream vaudeville.

In 1915 Wyer and Kelley published their second effort, an instrumental medley entitled "A Bunch of Blues." It strung the chorus of "The Long Lost Blues" together with three additional blues strains—"The Weary Blues," more commonly recognized as "Keep a-Knockin' but You Can't Come In," "Ship Wreck Blues," and the evocative "String Beans Blues," which Wyer and Kelley must have identified with the king of first-generation southern vaudeville piano bluesmen,
String Beans May. The same strain can be heard in Cow Cow Davenport's signature "Cow Cow Blues."  

When Handy's band made its first commercial recordings in New York City during the fall of 1917, "A Bunch of Blues" was one of the featured compositions. Shortly after the recordings came out, Handy relocated the "Home of the Blues" to New York City; in a matter of just five years he had managed, quite literally, to "blaze a path from Beale Street to Broadway." This specific accomplishment can be seen as an allegory for the commercial ascendancy of blues in African American vaudeville. By the time W. C. Handy got to Broadway, the raw material of southern vaudeville had been rounded into a black national entertainment medium in which blues was a full-fledged institution.

Southern vaudeville had drawn most of its strength and vitality from grass-roots sources; some of its most notable exponents had come directly "from the field to the stage." String Beans, Baby Seals, Johnnie Woods and Little Henry, Willie and Lulu Too Sweet, Laura Smith—these were some of the first "blue diamonds in the rough" to rise above the anonymous street corners, barrelhouses, juke joints, railroad depots, and one-room country shacks of folk-blues literature. They were fathers and mothers of the blues on the American stage. From the strategic platform of southern vaudeville, they made fundamental contributions to the development of America's "great and noble school of music." Their work came forth bristling with originality, characterized by self-determination and pride of regional cultural identity, and driven by insistent demands from the audience to do as Baby Seals had instructed in his anthem:

Oh sing 'em, sing 'em, sing them blues,
Cause they cert'ly sound good to me.

NOTES

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2. Leavenworth Herald, July 14, 1894.
3. Ibid., Dec. 29, 1894.
5. See Abbott, “‘Play That Barber Shop Chord,’” 289–325.
28. Hart A. Wand, “Dallas Blues” (Oklahoma City: Wand, 1912). Neither “Tango-tis” nor “Ready Money” appears to have been registered for copyright.
30. Ibid.
38. Witness O’Connor’s “They May Call You Hawaiian on Broadway (but You’re
Just Plain Nigger to Me),” Columbia A-2441, 1917.
House, 1973), 514-16.
42. Bert Leighton and Frank Leighton, “The Blues” (unpublished copyright submission,
43. Paul Oliver, liner notes to Peg Leg Howell and Eddie Anthony: Complete Record-
47. For a broader discussion of these issues, see Evans, Big Road Blues.
48. Handy, Father of the Blues, 146.
York Evening Post, quoted in The Literary Digest, Oct. 1917; and in Sylvester Russell, “The
50. The “Stage” columns of The Freeman often carried notices from parents of run-
aways. The following example appeared in the May 6, 1911, edition: “Any one knowing
the whereabouts of Stella Lee Taylor will please notify her mother, Mrs. Mollie Tay-
lor, 706 S. State St., Chicago, Ill.” This particular runaway appears to have been Jelly
Roll Morton’s girlfriend during his ca. 1910–11 exploits with southern vaudevillians.
See Alan Lomax, Mister Jelly Roll, 143–144; Lawrence Gushee, “A Preliminary Chron-
ology of the Early Career of Ferd ‘Jelly Roll’ Morton,” American Music 3, no. 4 (Win-
51. Sedalia Sentinel, Dec. 13, 1899, quoted in Edward A. Berlin, King of Ragtime: Scott
52. “Lincoln Theatre, Knoxville, Tenn.,” The Freeman, Mar. 7, 1908, p. 5.
54. Clarence Williams, “If You Don’t Want Me, Please Don’t Dog Me ’Round” (New
Orleans: Williams & Piron, 1916).
(New Orleans, L. Grunewald, 1910). Also see “‘You’ve Got to Shake, Rattle and Roll,
or My Money Ain’t a-Gwine,’” The Freeman, Feb. 12, 1910, p. 6.
68. People’s Theater advertisement in The Freeman, Mar. 12, 1910, p. 6.
70. “Gossip of the Stage,” The Freeman, Aug. 23, 1913, p. 5.
74. Baby F. Seals, “Bijou Theater, Greenwood, Miss.,” The Freeman, Jan. 21, 1911, p. 5.
79. “New Lincoln Opera House, Galveston, Tex.,” The Freeman, Apr. 12, 1913.
80. “Galveston, Tex.,” The Freeman, Sept. 6, 1913.
82. The Freeman, Dec. 27, 1913.
83. Walter S. Fearance, “St. Louis, Mo.,” The Freeman, Aug. 23, 1913.
88. “Smart Set Show Notes,” The Freeman, Apr. 21, 1917, p. 4.
89. “Wooden’s Bon Tons Captured Charlotte by Overwhelming Majority,” The Freeman, Oct. 6, 1917, p. 3.
93. Note, for example, Rupert Hughes, Famous American Composers: Being a Study of the Music of This Country, and of Its Future, with Biographies of the Leading Composers of the Present Time (Boston: L. C. Page, 1900), 22–23.
104. It is one of the unissued titles from his final, 1928 Okeh session; see R. M. W. Dixon and J. Godrich, Blues & Gospel Records, 1902–1943 (London: Storyville, 1982), 43.
107. Handy, Father of the Blues, 122.
108. Ibid., 119.
110. The earliest documented reference to Memphis as “Home of the Blues” is in a Pace and Handy advertisement in The Freeman of Apr. 24, 1915.
111. From a blurb on W. C. Handy in “The Stage,” The Freeman, Feb. 27, 1904, p. 5.
112. The Freeman, Sept. 7, 1918, p. 5.
114. Handy, Father of the Blues, 139–40.
117. “Stage,” The Freeman, Sept. 15, 1900.
119. “The Stage,” The Freeman, Sept. 23, 1899, p. 5. The title was originally published from Tin Pan Alley by F. A. “Kerry” Mills in 1897. Sigmund Spaeth identified Mills’s “At a Georgia Camp Meeting” in A History of Popular Music in America (New York: Random House, 1948), 284, as the “cake-walk classic” that Mills wrote “as a protest against the artificial ‘coon songs of the day.” It was immensely popular and extensively recorded.
121. Ibid., Nov. 22, 1902.
122. Correspondence from Mahara’s Minstrels in the Aug. 29, 1903, edition of The Freeman noted that their 1903–4 season began in Elburn, Ill., on Aug. 6, 1903, with James H. Harris as the new band director. The Feb. 27, 1904, edition found Handy “now teaching a band of full instrumentation at Clarksdale, Miss.”
123. Handy, Father of the Blues, 72.
124. Ibid., 73.
125. Ibid., 76–77.
126. The first year Handy was listed in the Memphis City Directory was 1907.
127. Handy, Father of the Blues, 94.
129. The May 25, 1901, edition of The Freeman carried this announcement: “Wm. C. Handy, cornet soloist, Instructor of band, orchestra and vocal music at the A. and M. College. At liberty after June 1st.”
130. The Freeman, May 25, 1901.
131. “Stage,” The Freeman, July 6, 1901; ibid., Aug. 31, 1901.
135. The Freeman, May 25, 1901; ibid., June 8, 1901.
136. “Stage,” The Freeman, June 1, 1901.
137. Ibid., June 15, 1901.
138. Ibid., July 6, 1901.
139. Ernest Hogan, letter to the editor, The Freeman, Mar. 9, 1901.
140. “Stage,” The Freeman, June 22, 1901.
141. The Freeman, July 27, 1901; ibid., Sept. 7, 1901.
142. Handy, Father of the Blues, 179.
143. “Stage,” The Freeman, Nov. 9, 1901.
144. The Freeman, Dec. 14, 1901; ibid., Dec. 28, 1901.
145. “Stage,” The Freeman, Jan. 18, 1902.
146. Ibid.
147. Ibid., Apr. 19, 1902.
148. Ibid., Mar. 1, 1902.
149. Ibid., Jan. 18, 1902; ibid., Mar. 1, 1902.
150. Ibid., Feb. 22, 1902.
151. An advertisement in the Sept. 16, 1905, edition of The Freeman placed Tick’s at 121 DeSoto Street. City directories from this period indicate that until 1906 or 1907, Fourth Street below Madison was called DeSoto Street.
152. Handy, Father of the Blues, 93–94, 125.
155. The Royal Theater disappears from the Memphis City Directory after 1911.
157. “Royal Theater, Memphis, Tenn.,” The Freeman, Apr. 9, 1910, p. 5.
159. “Royal Theater, Memphis,” The Freeman, Jan. 8, 1910, p. 5.
162. “Gem Theater, Memphis, Tenn.,” The Freeman, Nov. 28, 1908, p. 5; ibid., Dec. 19, 1908, p. 5; ibid., Nov. 27, 1909, p. 5.
166. “Gem Theater, Memphis, Tenn.,” The Freeman, Nov. 6, 1909, p. 5.
171. Memphis City Directory, 1908.
174. The last mention of Tick’s Big Vaudeville in The Freeman was on Mar. 6, 1909.
179. Ibid.
182. Memphis City Directory, 1908.
183. Handy, Father of the Blues, 91.
191. Ibid.
194. *The Freeman*, Sept. 30, 1916, p. 5. Estelle Harris may be the person known to have made race recordings in 1923 as “Sister Harris.”
213. Notes from unrecorded portion of Alan Lomax’s Library of Congress interviews with Jelly Roll Morton, as copied from the files by William Russell.
222. H. Woodard, “See the Attractions at the Douglass, Macon, Ga.,” The Freeman, Sept. 18, 1915, p. 5.
226. “Luna Park Theater, Atlanta, Georgia,” The Freeman, July 16, 1910, p. 5. The metaphor refers to the popular and reputedly dependable Elgin watch.
233. Entries in the Memphis City Directory identify “Willie Perry (c)” as the resident at this address from 1910 through 1912.
234. Advertisement for Willie and Lulu Too Sweet in The Freeman, Sept. 21, 1912, p. 5.
236. Handy, Father of the Blues, 93.
241. Charlie Jackson, “Mama Don’t Allow It (And She Ain’t Gonna Have It Here),” Paramount 12296, 1925.
244. Washboard Sam, “Mama Don’t Allow No. 1,” Vocalion 03275, 1935; idem, “Mama Don’t Allow No. 2,” Vocalion 03375, 1935.
247. Handy, Father of the Blues, 128.
248. “Park Theater, Dallas, Tex.,” The Freeman, Sept. 13, 1913, p. 5.
249. Handy, Father of the Blues, 110.
256. Handy, Father of the Blues, 102.
258. Handy, Father of the Blues, 117.
259. “Notes from a Rabbit Foot Co.,” The Freeman, Apr. 18, 1914, p. 4.
262. Willie Toosweet [sic], “I’m So Glad My Mamma Don’t Know Where I’m At” (St. Louis: Syndicate Music, 1915).
263. Willie Toosweet [sic], “I’m So Glad My Mamma Don’t Know Where I’m At” (New York: Leo Feist, 1918). Dolly Connolly’s photograph is inset on the cover.
265. See “Champion Parody Writer Heads Lyric Bill,” Houston Informer, Sept. 19, 1925, p. 5. Willie “Too Sweet” Perry is probably the same person who made race recordings in 1928 and 1931 as “Papa Too Sweet.”
266. The Freeman, Aug. 14, 1915, p. 5. Although the song was originally advertised in The Freeman as “The Hesitation Blues,” Handy’s sheet music title was “The Hesitating Blues.”
268. Scott Middleton and Billy Smythe, “Hesitation Blues” (Louisville: Billy Smythe Music, 1915). The Catalogue of Copyright Entries indicates that Handy’s “Hesitating Blues” and Middleton and Smythe’s “Hesitation Blues” were both logged at the copyright office on May 5, 1915.
269. Niles, “Notes to the Collection,” 42.
271. “Waco, Tex.,” The Freeman, Mar. 1, 1913.
274. Sara Martin Acc. by her Jug Band, “I’m Gonna Be a Lovin’ Old Soul,” Okeh 8211, 1924.
277. Ibid., July 31, 1915, p. 5.
278. “Stageoscope,” The Freeman, June 5, 1915.
280. Handy, Father of the Blues, 127.
281. Ibid.
282. This slogan first appeared in Williams and Piron’s Freeman advertisements during the fall of 1919. See Abbott, “‘Brown Skin,’” 13–14.
283. Handy, Father of the Blues, 127.
286. “Call for Pace and Handy’s Song Hits,” The Freeman, July 17, 1920, p. 5.
293. Ibid.
294. Ibid.
296. Ibid., Oct. 4, 1913, 5.
297. Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 95, 279.