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Frontispiece: Cover of "The Blues" (no. 25). The first titular blues, published early in 1912 by a major New York firm, symbolically represents the introduction of blues into the mainstream. (Photograph courtesy of the Hurwitt Collection.)

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P R E F A C E

THE SCOPE OF THIS EDITION

This critical edition brings together for the first time all known blues sheet music from the first four years of commercial blues in America (1912–1915), along with a selection of proto-blues, which are earlier works that show significant blues-related features. It contains forty-three blues and twenty-four proto-blues, making a total of sixty-seven works. The edition is organized chronologically¹ by date of copyright,² the proto-blues presented first, followed by the blues.

Many of these pieces appear in print here for the first time since their original publication or (for a few unpublished items) for the first time altogether. Of those works that have previously been published, few have appeared in a scholarly or critical edition.³ Taken as a whole, these works form a comprehensive chronicle of the rise and early evolution of this most influential of genres, and provide a wealth of examples of largely unrecognized inventiveness and originality.

Given the intense interest in the origins of blues among historians, musicians, and enthusiasts, it is perhaps surprising that this edition is the first to attempt a systematic presentation of early blues sheet music. In fact, sheet music has generally been neglected in comparison with other aspects of blues scholarship. The reasons for this

1. The exception is the year 1912, which serves as both the last year of proto-blues included in this edition and the first year of published blues. As this edition separates the proto-blues and blues, so the chronology for 1912 has inevitably not been strictly preserved. For example, although all the 1912 proto-blues were copyrighted after Smith and Brymn's "The Blues" (no. 25)—the first item in the blues section—they inevitably appear before it, as the final items in the proto-blues section.

2. I have chosen the date of copyright as the ordering principle rather than the date either of composition or of publication, because the copyright date of the works is nearly always known exactly, whereas the dates of composition and publication are usually not. Three works in this edition were not registered for copyright: Handy's "The Memphis Blues" (no. 28a) from 1912, McKinnon's "I Got the Blues" (no. 47) and Walsh's "The Irish Blues" (no. 67) from 1915. Handy's work has a known date of publication, which the edition uses as the determining factor for deciding its order. McKinnon's and Walsh's works do not, however, so each is placed as the last item of the year of publication (1914 and 1915, respectively) for want of further information.

3. Three major reissues of early blues have been published. Both *Beale Street and Other Classic Blues: 38 Works, 1901–1921*, ed. David A. Jasen (New York: Dover, 1998) and the three-volume *Early Blues* (Roseville, CA: PianoMania, n.d.) are unedited reproductions of the original sheet music. W. C. Handy's *Blues: An Anthology*, originally published in 1926, and at this writing in its fourth edition (New York: Dover, 2012) is a unique work, tracing blues from its origins, including many examples of published blues, and including an extensive introduction and annotations by pioneering blues scholar Abbe Niles. While these publications overlap somewhat with this edition, their focus is quite different: they include many examples from the post-1915 period; they exclude proto-blues almost entirely; none are critical editions; and, of course, their inclusion of 1912–1915 blues is highly selective, rather than comprehensive, as here.

“ T O O B L A M E D M E A N T O C R Y ” :
T H E E V O L U T I O N , I D E N T I T Y , A N D
P O W E R O F E A R L Y P U B L I S H E D B L U E S

“I’ve got the blues,
But I’m too blamed mean to cry.”
—Chris Smith and Tim Brymn, “The Blues” (1912)

A G E N R E I S B O R N

The birthdate of a new musical genre is often hard to pin down with any precision, but the case of published blues is an exception. In 1912, four works titled blues appeared in print, the very first time this title had been used on a piece of sheet music. In order of appearance, those works were: Chris Smith and Tim Brymn’s “The Blues” (no. 25 in this edition, the first to be copyrighted, on 12 January, whose chorus is quoted at the head of this essay), H. Franklin “Baby” Seals’ “Baby Seals Blues” (no. 26), Hart A. Wand’s “Dallas Blues” (no. 27a), and W. C. Handy’s “The Memphis Blues” (no. 28a).¹ Collectively, these four publications have a profound importance, for their spontaneous appearance marks the clear beginning of what one might call a blues industry, an industry that has had an enormous impact on the course of vernacular music ever since.

To understand where the blues industry came from, we need to go back a few years. The evidence suggests that blues as a genre coalesced shortly before the turn of the twentieth century in the Deep South in the Black subculture.² The earliest blues were a new musical style, as yet unnamed. Discussing one such song, “Gwine take the morphine and die, Lord,” which he encountered around 1893, W. C. Handy wrote: “It was a blues, but the word formed no part of its title. What we now call blues, to the folk musicians meant a *kind* of song; individually they bore no such designation.”³ Handy’s suggestion that blues existed as a style before it became a reified genre is confirmed by the seminal work of social scientist Howard W. Odum, who collected the texts of over

1. A fifth blues, “Negro Blues” (no. 29a), by Leroy “Lasses” White, was copyrighted in 1912 but not published until the following year, under the title “Nigger Blues” (no. 29b).

2. For capitalization of racial and ethnic identities, this edition follows the current recommendation of the Chicago Manual of Style. See University of Chicago Press Editorial Staff, “Black and White: A Matter of Capitalization,” <https://cmosshoptalk.com/2020/06/22/black-and-white-a-matter-of-capitalization/>, accessed 23 February 2023; and *Chicago Manual of Style Online* <https://www-chicago-manualofstyle-org/book/ed17/part2/ch08/psec038.html>, accessed 23 February 2023.

3. W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography* (1941, repr. New York: Da Capo, 1969), 142–43. Emphasis in original.

A P P A R A T U S

This is a critical edition intended for both study and performance. The music is newly set, in accordance with other MUSA editions, for visual and editorial coherence, and consistency has been brought to certain minor details of musical notation and orthography listed below. Anomalies in the sources that are considered likely or certain errors are corrected in the text and discussed in the critical notes. Issues considered possible errors are not corrected in the text, but are discussed in the critical notes.

SOURCES

The sources for the works in this collection are the copyright deposits at the Library of Congress. In the few instances where a work was not registered for copyright, and hence no copyright deposit exists, this edition uses the earliest known printed version of the sheet music as the source.

PRESENTATION OF EACH WORK

This edition presents each work in four sections. These are, in order:

1. Factual information about the work.
2. An introductory essay about the work.
3. Critical notes.
4. The score of the work.

1. Factual Information

The factual information that is presented before the score of each work is as follows:

1. The work's title, as given on the first page of the music. (Any alternative titles given on the front cover or on the copyright entry are in footnotes.)
2. The work's subtitle or alternative titles (if any).
3. Composer credit for music. (Because many of the items in this edition are directly taken, or modified, from folk sources, the editor has used the designation "music credit" and "words credit" where normally "composer" and "lyricist" would conventionally be used.)
4. Author credit for words. (See description of Composer credit, above.)
5. The date of copyright, along with the unique Library of Congress catalog number created for the purpose of copyright registration.
6. The name and location of the copyright holder at the time the work was registered for copyright, as given on the copyright registration.

1. I HAVE GOT THE BLUES

Alternative title. I Have Got the Blues To Day! [*sic*, on front cover]

Music credit. Gustave Blessner

Words credit. Sarah M. Graham

Year of Publication. 1850¹

Copyright holder. Firth Pond & Co., Troy, New York

Publisher. Firth Pond & Co., Troy, New York

Distinctive features of original edition. Front cover has minimal artwork title, describes the song as “a comic ballad,” and has dedication to “Miss Mary E. Thompson.”

Structural overview. G major: Introduction₍₈₎, 2 Verses₍₃₂₌₁₆₊₁₆₎, Interlude₍₈₎, 2 Verses₍₃₂₌₁₆₊₁₆₎, Coda (=Interlude)₍₈₎

Significant recordings. None

Principal commentary. *Long Lost Blues*, 182.

The first published song to celebrate the notion of having the blues appeared in Troy, New York in 1850. “I Have Got the Blues” was the work of Gustave Blessner, a minor, if prolific, composer of waltzes, polkas, and the like, with words by Sarah Graham, about whom nothing is known. The male protagonist has been deserted by a girl, Fannie, whom he met the previous evening at a dinner party, and to whom he gave “a charming serenade.” The next morning, however, he finds out that “little Fan has gone away,” and as a result has “got the blues to day [*sic*].” Despite the elevated Victorian style of the language, the scenario outlined forms a striking parallel with later, fully evolved blues songs, where rejection by a lover is the archetypical cause of the singer’s blues.² Even so, the pathos of this song is clearly not intended to be taken at face value: the front cover describes it as a comic ballad, a point made explicit by a charming eight-bar polka-like interlude placed between the second and third verses, and which repeats as a coda when the work ends.

Musically, the work uses the art-music-derived language of a standard parlor song, with no hint of the blues idiom. Nevertheless, with historical hindsight, one might regard the unexpected use of the minor third in the melody harmonized by the tonic minor chord as the singer refers to his blues (the B♭s in mm. 19 and 43), a device clearly meant to be expressive of the singer’s sadness, as being in some sense an anticipation of a blues third.

CRITICAL NOTES

M. 51, beat 2: Edition adds *fz* to match m. 27.

M. 55, beat 1: Edition adds *f* to match m. 31.

1. This work is too early to have a Library of Congress registration number or an exact known date of copyright.

2. *Long Lost Blues*, 41–43.

(16)

2. Said Bil-ly Ly- ons. to Stack- o- Lee, - "Please don't take my the
4. Bil- ly Ly- ons, Bil- ly Ly- ons, He stag- gered through the

20

life. _____ Re- mem- ber _____ my chil- dren _____
door _____ 'Cause Stack- o- Lee _____ had plugged _____ him _____

23

and my lov- ing wife." _____ Ev- 'ry- bod- y bod- y talk a- bout Stack- o-
with his for- ty four. _____ Ev- 'ry- bod- y bod- y talk a- bout Stack- o-

27

after last verse play this into Finale

-Lee. _____ -Lee. _____

17B. HONKY TONKY MONKEY RAG (PIANO VERSION)

Music by
Chris Smith

[INTRODUCTION]
Moderato

Musical notation for the introduction, measures 1-4. The piece is in 2/4 time and marked Moderato. The left hand (L.H.) is marked *f*. The right hand features a melody with eighth notes and quarter notes, including accents and slurs. The left hand provides a rhythmic accompaniment with chords and single notes.

Musical notation for the first system of the main piece, measures 5-8. Measure 5 is marked with a box containing 'A'. The dynamic is *mf*. The right hand continues the melody with eighth notes and quarter notes, while the left hand provides a steady accompaniment.

Musical notation for the second system of the main piece, measures 9-12. The right hand features a more active melody with eighth notes and quarter notes, and the left hand continues with a consistent accompaniment.

Musical notation for the third system of the main piece, measures 13-16. The left hand is marked L.H. The right hand continues the melody with eighth notes and quarter notes, and the left hand provides a steady accompaniment.

Musical notation for the fourth system of the main piece, measures 17-20. The dynamic is *mf*. The right hand continues the melody with eighth notes and quarter notes, and the left hand provides a steady accompaniment.

30 A . 1913 MEDLEY BLUES (ORCHESTRAL VERSION)

Music by
Alex M. Valentine, Jr.

[INTRODUCTION]
[Moderato]

The musical score is for the introduction of '1913 Medley Blues'. It is in 2/4 time and B-flat major. The tempo is marked 'Moderato' and the dynamics are 'f' (forte). The score includes parts for Flute, Clarinet in Bb, Cornet in Bb, Trombone, Drums, Piano, Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, Violoncello, and Bass. The Flute, Clarinet, and Cornet parts feature a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The Trombone part has a bass line with eighth notes. The Drums part shows a steady rhythm with snare and bass drum. The Piano part has a harmonic accompaniment with chords and moving lines in both hands. The Violin 1 part has a melodic line similar to the flute. The Violin 2, Viola, and Violoncello parts provide harmonic support with sustained notes and chords. The Bass part has a simple bass line with eighth notes.

Flute
Clarinet in B \flat
Cornet in B \flat
Trombone
Drums
Piano
Violin 1
Violin 2
Viola
Violoncello
Bass

40. THE SAINT LOUIS BLUES

Words and Music by
W. C. Handy

[INTRODUCTION]

Moderato

5

9

[VERSE]

slowly

1. I hate to see — de eve-ning sun go down, —
 2. Been to de Gyp- sy to get ma for- tune tole, —
 3. You ought to see — dat stove pipe brown of mine, —

13

Hate to see — de eve- nin' sun go down, —
 To de Gyp- sy done got ma for- tune tole, —
 Lak he owns — de Di- mon Jo- seph line. —