“Make My Getaway”: The Blues Lives of Black Minstrels in W. C. Handy’s *Father of the Blues*

The *St. Louis Blues,*” observed Langston Hughes in the summer of 1941, “is sung more than any other song on the air waves, is known in Shanghai and Buenos Aires, Paris and Berlin—in fact, is heard so often in Europe that a great many Europeans think it must be the American National Anthem. . . . in a Tok[yo] restaurant one night I heard a Louis Armstrong record of the *St. Louis Blues* played over and over for a crowd of Japanese diners there” (144-45). If W. C. Handy’s universally celebrated 1914 composition—“the most influential American song ever written,” according to Jasen and Jones (235)—was powerless to prevent Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, then Handy’s autobiography, published to general acclaim six months before the bombing, was soon put to use in the Allied war effort, a morale booster on the Western Front. “It may please you to know,” Handy wrote composer William Grant Still in 1944, “that the Council on Books in War Time has our permission to send 100,000 books of my autobiography *Father of the Blues* to the boys overseas without cost, and I received a letter from an Army Chaplain stating that this book has furnished many texts for his sermon” (Southern, “In Retrospect” 231).

At the time of *Father of the Blues*’ publication in 1941, according to Handy’s white literary associate Abbe Niles, Handy was “the most famous and the most affectionately regarded American Negro” (*Father v*)—the benign obverse, as it were, of Richard Wright, whose infamous and scarifying *Native Son,* published the year before, was decidedly not the sort of propaganda the Council on Books in War Time wanted to place in the hands of an uneasily segregated U.S. military.1 If Wright’s Bigger Thomas was the avatar of African-American rage and despair, Handy’s popular acclaim as what *Newsweek* called “the Beethoven of Beale Street” (“Beethoven” 46) was grounded in the story of a Southern black boy who makes good, creatively and financially, in an America fully prepared to honor his musical gifts, if not always his rights as a citizen. Nor was this implicit comparison lost on Handy’s editorial collaborator, Arna Bontemps, who assumed that *Father of the Blues* would be vetted by its editors with an eye on mainstream sales. “Just read in a Publishers’ Weekly],” Bontemps wrote Langston Hughes several months after delivering the finished manuscript, summarizing 1940 in the book marts, that one of the sensations of the year was the sudden boom and abrupt decline of *Native Son* as a best seller. It concluded that the boom was due to the novelty of such book being chosen by Book-of-the-Month and the fade out followed discovery on the part of readers (who thought they were getting a murder thriller) that the book contained a “political argument” . . . . The Handy book should go to press soon—vastly diluted since I last saw it, no

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doubt. I take no credit or blame for its final shape. (qtd. in Nichols 54)²

_Native Son_, in other words, was a filial indictment; _Father of the Blues_, dictated by Handy on the eve of world war and ending with the words “God Bless America” (a nod to Irving Berlin’s 1939 anthem) was a paternal benediction, a Washingtonian refusal of “bitterness” in the service of uplift and national unity, the anti-__Native Son__.

Or was it? While the political argument residing within the pages of Handy’s autobiography has long remained obscure, it is worth remembering that Handy initially entitled his life-story _Fight It Out_. “Since the title ‘Fight It Out’ did not express a musical career,” he notes in the Author’s Acknowledgments, “I have changed it to ‘Father of the Blues’” (xiii). The original title resonates nowhere more than in the opening chapter, in which Handy sketches the lives of his two grandfathers, both of whom had struggled in different ways against the confines of slavery. His paternal grandfather William Wise Handy had run away from his master in Princess Anne, Maryland, then “was overtaken and sold into Alabama where, still urged by the desire for freedom, he started an insurrection for escape, and was shot but not killed.” Later he acquired a liberal education—how, Handy does not specify—and became “an honored and respected citizen of Florence” (3). Handy’s maternal grandfather, Christopher Brewer, remained a “trusted servant” after being freed by his master, John Wilson, later defending both Wilson’s person and property against violent white renegades. “At one time, near the close of the Civil War,” Handy writes,

guerilla warfare was common in this locality. Three robbers were eventually hanged five miles out of Florence. These thieves had undertaken to rob John Wilson. They stripped him and tortured him to death by burning paper and tearing his body to make him tell where his money was hidden. He refused. My Grandpa Brewer likewise knew. They shot him to make him tell. He also refused. But when his wounds had sufficiently healed he went to Nashville and brought his young master, Coonie Foster, back home and disclosed to him the hiding place of the money. (3-4)

“It is probably my inheritance from these two characters,” Handy concludes of his grandfathers, “that enabled me to submit to certain hard conditions long enough to fight my way out and yet be considered sufficiently ‘submissive’ by those who held the whip hand” (4).

A central paradox of _Father of the Blues_ lies here, in Handy’s strategic willingness as minstrel man, songwriter, and bandleader to wear the mask of the “reliable,” the submissive and trustworthy Negro—his willingness, above all, to provide campaign music for white Southern politicians, including Mississippi demagogue James Vardaman and Memphis boss E. H. Crump—while simultaneously engaging in overt and coded racial revolt against the “hard conditions” Southern life imposed on him.³ As a member of Mahara’s Minstrels between 1896 and 1903, Handy packs a small arsenal (“a Winchester .44, a Smith and Wesson and a Colt revolver”), pulls a gun at least once against disrespectful white men in Texas, and lives to tell the tale (48). On another occasion, in Tennessee, he punches a white man in the face and barely escapes a lynch mob. Indeed, lynch mobs, actual and imagined, make their baleful presence felt repeatedly in the first half of _Father of the Blues_: in Shreveport, Memphis, Missouri, Mississippi. They hold the whip hand with a vengeance.

Handy’s autobiography pivots on a chapter entitled “Trouble, Trouble, I’ve Had It All My Days,” in which his bitter disgust at the aftermath of a lynching—the severed head of a young black man, tossed into a crown of Memphis blacks—precipitates his flight north to New York, an echo of the slave narrative’s freedom quest. _Father of the Blues_ is, in its own way,
as much a "murder thriller" as Native Son. Its subject is not, however, the murder of a young white woman by a desperate young black man. Its subject is the singularly murderous conditions—"the nightmare of those minstrel days" (51), as Handy calls them—that desperate young black men were forced to navigate in the Jim Crow South in order to realize their professional ambitions.

If Handy is determined in Father of the Blues to script a myth of blues birth and capitalization—the composer as self-made man—then his text also summons up and dramatizes the unborn blues as a surplus emotion, a mixture of despair, revolt, and cathartic laughter begotten by racial violence in the 1890s and desperately seeking creative outlet. To put the matter another way, black minstrels led blues lives that their burlesque art could not adequately express. Handy, a member of this musically literate class of brass-and-string-band performers, encountered the "real" blues—which is to say, emergent folk blues—in the Mississippi Delta in several moments of unexpected inter-class contact, after a preparatory immersion experience during an earlier sojourn in St. Louis. Handy’s life as a minstrel and later as a Mississippi bandleader (1903-1905) during a period of heightened anti-black reaction enabled him to write the blues by forcing him to feel the blues, participating in his own class-specific way in a larger current of black working-class feeling. The precise contours of this participation have never been adequately delineated, in part because Handy’s mythmaking betrays an unmistakable class bias—a mixture of condescension, racial husbandry, and Tin Pan Alley schmaltz—that obscures his own profound emotional investment. "... ragtime, jazz and the blues," he insisted in a 1950 interview, "reflect the honest, the pure and the genuine expression straight out of the souls of submerged people. I dug deep into their hearts and brought forth tones untouched by artificiality, melodies unspoiled by fluff" (Handy, "Paul"). Houston A. Baker, Jr., has dismissed Handy’s autobiography as "a simplistic detailing of a progress, describing, as it were, the elevation of a ‘primitive’ folk ditty to the status of ‘art’ in America" (4), but Handy’s detailing of his entrepreneurial ascent is shadowed always by a terror, an economy of extreme Southern violence that he both evokes and resists and that renders Father of the Blues anything but a simplistic uplift narrative. Handy’s autobiography is a foundational blues text not just because it elaborates a myth of origins revolving around a pair of well-known first encounters between Handy and his "primitive music" (his term) that he would subsequently transmute into profitable pop-blues, but because it represents the world of pre-blues black entertainment in the state of crisis that preceded and accompanied that process.

Blues song, for Handy, supplied an answer to the paradox proposed to the turn-of-the-century black Southern imagination by the coexistence of seemingly unlimited geographical mobility and entrepreneurial freedom, on the one hand, and increasingly virulent white racist violence, on the other. Minstrelsy often graced its young black male troupers with material benefits inconceivable to their slave-born parents—not just fancy new costumes and private Pullman coaches, but eye-catching jewelry. "Note from Mahara’s Minstrels," read an 1897 item in the Indianapolis Freeman, a popular black newspaper, "A great many of the boys took advantage of the market price on diamonds and now there are quite a number to be seen glittering among the boys." Yet such riches accrued only to those who traveled through a Southland where black material success was bitterly resented by poor whites, lynching was endemic, and unknown young black men were the preferred victims. "Colored minstrels were considered an amusing night entertainment," remembered Handy’s
contemporary Tom Fletcher, “in towns where there was no colored population” (57), but so-called “strange niggers” were anathema after dark. Dixie-style entertainment could take many forms, including elaborated sadism; minstrel life was a nightly high-wire act in the face of potential white savagery. “Usually they had signs prominently displayed which read ‘Nigger, Read and Run,’” Fletcher added:

And sometimes there would be added “and if you can’t read, run anyhow.” . . . After the show [at] night all the colored people connected with the show would get together and parade down to the car. If there were no trains leaving that night we would hire an engineer and get right out of town without delay. (57)

“More than once during my travels in the North and South,” Handy writes in the same vein, “I had passed through towns with signs saying, ‘Nigger don’t let the sun go down on you here’” (86). The opening line of “St. Louis Blues”—“I hate to see de eve’-nin’ sun go down”—may be read, in other words, as coded racial protest resonating within a narrative of lost love, a black man’s transgendered lament at white Southern violence and the dislocations it imposes:

I hate to see de eve’-nin’ sun go down
Hate to see de eve’-nin’ sun go down
‘Cause ma baby, he done lef’ dis town

(143)

If, as Hughes insisted, “St. Louis Blues” was taken by Europeans to be the American National Anthem, it was an anthem that embraced rather than repressed the “shadow of a deep disappointment” evoked by Du Bois in The Souls of Black Folk (1903). Although first performed by Handy and his band as a sprightly double-time march, the song was soon reclaimed by Bessie Smith and others as a plaintive slow-drag with a hybrid major-minor melody. “Here were tunes,” wrote Abbe Niles of Handy’s blues compositions, “with a third dimension; under their sweetness was something bitter” (in Handy, Blues 28).

Bitterness is not a quality we generally associate with Handy, and the apparent lack of overt protest in Father of the Blues may well be one reason for its near total neglect by critics of African-American autobiography, not to mention its adoption as an instrument of wartime propaganda. “He is no bitter protagonist for his race,” wrote Rebecca Chalmers Barton in Witnesses for Freedom: Negro Americans in Autobiography (1948), still the only extended discussion of Handy’s literary achievement. “He makes no direct battle for Negro rights against white wrongs” (58). In a 1945 article in the Chicago Defender entitled “The Blues School of American Literature,” Earl Conrad ignored Handy’s autobiography entirely while praising recent “protest” works by Wright and Chester Himes. “Now, as a ‘bull market’ in Negro books looms . . . , the neurotic, frustrated, tragic—and very real—side of the Negro is being pictured” (11). While Father of the Blues does, in fact, build to a climax in which its protagonist’s neurotic, frustrated, tragic side briefly gets the better of him—“my nerves—shattered!” (206), he cries as blindness suddenly descends in the early 1920s—Handy’s autobiography is also distinguished by its prevailing insistence on escaping from the sort of racial obsessions that Ralph Ellison was referring to when, in a review of Wright’s Black Boy (1945), he described the blues as “an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged
grain . . .” (90). Flight—from racial violence, but also from racial bitterness (if not lingering sadness)—is a key motif in *Father of the Blues*. Too much money stood to be made by a shrewd black businessman who could steer clear of both dangers, refusing to finger the jagged grain of his terrors, humiliations, and revenge fantasies. “Between playing for dances in magnificent plantation mansions from one end of the Delta country to the other,” Handy wrote of his Mississippi sojourn, “striking up the band for an occasional political candidate and conducting jam sessions in the New World [the black entertainment-and-prostitution district], I made more money in Clarksdale than I had ever earned. This was not strange. Everybody prospered in that Green Eden” (82-83).

“Green Eden” is not, needless to say, how most African Americans would describe the Mississippi of then-recently elected Governor James Vardaman (1903-1907), a demagogue who spoke approvingly of local mob rule and ceaselessly incited the racial resentment of poor whites. “If I were a sheriff and a Negro fiend fell into my hands,” the candidate had famously proclaimed, “I would run him out of the county. If I were governor and asked for troops to protect him I would send them. But if I were a private citizen I would lead the mob to string the brute up, and I haven’t much respect for a white man who wouldn’t” (qtd. in Holmes 109). Yet Handy—who veils the precise nature of his participation in Vardaman’s gubernatorial campaign, for obvious reasons—is relentlessly buoyed by the intertwined dreams of artistic and financial self-making he shared with other African Americans of his generation; he observes his murderous surroundings with a rare lucidity but refuses to be undone by them. Handy “never shies away from looking at the scars he and his people bear,” Barton rightly observes, “but he approaches the future with an air of sweet reasonableness” (67). Handy’s signal achievement is not merely to have survived and prospered under the hardest of conditions, but to have refigured American expressive geographies in a way that has not fully been appreciated, fusing the sweetness of unlimited entrepreneurial opportunity with the bitter but transcendentable facts of racial violence into a bittersweet and unbeatable pop-blues amalgam. Handy *made his getaway*, in this doubled sense: He lived for most of his adult life off the profits of a song, “St. Louis Blues,” in which he’d coded his own remarkable escape from a near-lynching in Tennessee.

The incident in question took place in 1903, near the end of Handy’s days as a bandleader with Mahara’s Minstrels, a touring black troupe. Frank Mahara, Handy’s boss, was a good white man, by the standards of the day: He treated his black employees well—since they happened also to be his investment capital—and protected them against the depredations of bad white men. “The music, the uniforms, the program and the talent,” Handy writes,

> even the food he bought and the Pullman car in which we traveled, had to be the best obtainable. He also saw to it that our Pullman had a hidden compartment under the floor . . . a compartment which we came to call the “bear-wallow” or the “get-away.” In this secret hold we carried reserves of food, not to mention a small arsenal. One night in a Tennessee town it contained me. (45)

The blues “sound” of black minstrel life is audible here, in the paradoxical conjunction of Pullman car luxury with preparations for ignominious flight. This below-the-floorboards compartment or “get-away” fulfills the same symbolic function as the clay sinkhole into which Wright’s young black protagonist Big Boy crawls to escape the white lynch mob in “Big Boy Leaves Home” (1936), or the well-lit basement chamber into which the narrator of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) retreats: It is, in Houston A. Baker’s words, “the subterranean hole where the [African-American] trickster has his ludic,
deconstructive being” (151). Handy’s survival requires him to play the trickster one night in Murfreesboro when he and the other minstrels are gathered in the Pullman car to “egg on” a boxing match between a pair of fellow performers:

\[ \text{... from out of nowhere, a white ticket agent with a coupling pin in his hand suddenly shoved his way through the crowd. He raised the heavy iron and aimed it at the head of one of the boxers.} \]

A gory tragedy was in the making and would have been accomplished had I not been standing where I could intercept the blow. I sprang forward, caught the man’s hand and wrested the iron backwards. I failed to disarm him, however, and a second later when he regained his balance, he turned on me. This time Will Garland [a musician] grabbed him from behind and pinned his arms to his sides. That was all I wanted. I savagely rubbed my fist in the helpless fellow’s mouth. “You just wait here till I come back,” I concluded melodramatically. Then I rushed away angrily.

Of course I was bluffing. I had no intention of coming back, but I must have acted my part well. The railroad man assumed that I’d gone for a pistol, and when Will Garland released him, he broke and ran to the station and hid. Meanwhile, I crawled into the “get-away” and waited for times to get better.

Some time later I heard the sheriff and his posse searching our car. Mahara was with them. He pretended to be angry enough to chew nails. I could hear his voice tremble with rage as he told the Murfreesboro sheriff and his men that I had better sense than to come on that car again after what I’d done. He left no doubt that he would make even shorter shrift of me than the sheriff intended, once he got his hands on me. This pleased the sheriff. He and his men gave up the search of the car and went out to scour the countryside. Many times I have had to use such native wit or suffer for the lack of it. (46-47; italics added)

Handy “makes his get-away” by performing it, an interracial burlesque that depends as much on Frank Mahara’s pretended fury (supplanting the white posse’s only to displace it entirely) as on Handy’s own verbalized threats against the white ticket agent. Handy’s tone in this passage, alternately cartoon-melodramatic and dryly Washingtonian, defies easy description; devoid both of palpable terror and lingering racial resentment, it may lead us to overlook the true gravity of Handy’s position as the propagator of a lynching offense. Handy’s tone proceeds from what might be called his “stance,” his orientation as autobiographer (in Jerome Bruner’s words) “toward the world, toward self, toward fate and the possible” (45). Handy’s stance in Father of the Blues is that of a forward-looking survivor determined to create expressive racial art in the face of white violence and to profit from that art by forging interracial alliances whenever possible. “Nothing made me glow so much,” he confesses elsewhere, “as seeing the softening effect of music on racial antagonisms,” and it is precisely this attitude which facilitates his ultimate mainstream success (Father 116). When white violence threatens here, however, Handy-the-trickster retreats and regroups, crawling into the “get-away” and waiting for times to get better.

“A hibernation,” insists Ellison’s Invisible Man, “is a covert preparation for a more overt action” (13). Handy’s response to the Murfreesboro episode is a kind of creative hibernation; the overt action it covertly prepares for is his writing of “St. Louis Blues” in Memphis in 1914, eleven years after his near-lynching.6 Connecting both episodes, strikingly, is Handy’s withdrawal to a solitary chamber: Retreating from his wife and children, he rents a room on Beale Street for one sleepless but productive night, the first time in his songwriting career he has done this. “I could feel the blues coming on, and I didn’t want to be distracted, so I packed my grip and made my getaway. . . . the color and spell of Beale Street mingled outside, but I neither saw nor heard it that night. I had a song to write” (118). Handy’s Beale Street hotel room, the long-deferred fulfillment of the “get-away” compartment in Mahara’s Pullman coach, is an
exemplary instance of what Houston A. Baker has termed “the black (W)hole”: a privileged, protected, liberatory site of black creativity. “. . . in the script of Afro-America,” insists Baker, the hole is the domain of Wholeness, an achieved relationality of black community in which desire recollects experience and sends it forth as blues. To be Black and (W)hole is to escape incarcerating restraints of a white world (i.e., a black hole) and to engage the concentrated, underground singularity of experience that results in a blues desire’s expressive fullness. (151-52)

As desire recollects experience to begin the process of blues composition, what Handy calls “a flood of memories” fills his mind. “First,” he says, “there was the picture I had of myself, broke, unshaven, wanting even a decent meal, and standing before the lighted saloon in St. Louis without a shirt under my frayed coat.” Next is his memory of a heartbroken black woman he’d encountered during the youthful trip, stumbling down a poorly lighted street muttering a kind of proto-blues: “‘Ma man’s got a heart like a rock cast in de sea’” (119). Musical elements, too, are a crucial part of the racial statement he wishes to make: “blue notes” to approximate the vocal inflections of blues singers, breaks between lines of verse to encourage instrumental improvisation. “Altogether,” Handy writes, “I aimed to use all that is characteristic of the Negro from Africa to Alabama” (121). The resulting blues song, as Baker suggests, is both “an achieved relationality of black community” and a more pointed engagement with the “concentrated underground singularity” of Handy’s own experience. Underground is the operative term here: At no point in his account of the song’s composition does Handy explicitly refer to his near-lynching in Murfreesboro. The only evidence is the escape-word itself, resurfacing as it does near the beginning of “St. Louis Blues”:

Feelin’ tomorrow lak Ah feel today,
Feel tomorrow lak Ah feel today,

I’ll pack my trunk and make mah getaway. (143)

These lines are both a memorable evocation of the troubled African-American mind in the age of Jim Crow and, I would suggest, an unconscious recapitulation of Handy’s brutally specific encounter with “hard conditions” in central Tennessee. Blues desire’s expressive fullness is achieved through a fusion of collective and individual concerns. This fusion takes place within a context of economic self-making in which the radically decapitalized (i.e., valueless and lynchable) black body of the postbellum South is preserved, enriched, reclaimed. Diamond rings and Pullman cars were one way Handy and his fellow black minstrels remade themselves; the shrewdest of accommodationist politics mixed with episodes of strategic resistance, both veiled and overt, was another. “St. Louis Blues,” America’s shadow national anthem, is veiled strategic resistance writ large.

The point of the blues life, as Baker rightly observes, is to “successfully negotiate an obdurate ‘economics of slavery’ and achieve a resonant, improvisational, expressive dignity” (12). Yet what bound Handy in fraternity with the country bluesmen whose “primitive music” inspired him was less an economics of slavery—against which his class-specific musical education enabled him to gain considerable leverage—than an economics of disciplinary violence, the random, ritualized, and blanketing terror that upheld Jim Crow. White lynchers were not known for their interest in making class distinctions when selecting victims from the available pool of unfamiliar black faces. A minstrel might pack his trunk and ride in Pullman luxury, whereas a country bluesman might hoist his guitar case and hop aboard a freight car; the lives and livelihoods of both depended on knowing where the getaway was, and how to sing it into being.
If the blues, as Handy claims, “were conceived in aching hearts,” then Handy’s own role in the birthing process has remained obscure, both because of and despite the mythic contours of his autobiography (76). His image as a blues father figure was in place long before *Father of the Blues* was published; when, for example, his Memphis Blues Band played Harlem during the summer of 1919, the *Chicago Defender* wrote that Handy was “well known over the world as the ‘Daddy of the Blues’” (qtd. in Abbott and Soroff 422). The extraordinary popularity of “St. Louis Blues” alone—the best-selling song in any medium by 1930 (Alkyer 37)—provoked commentators into mythomania. “More couples have danced to Mr. Handy’s tunes,” wrote Ralph Thompson in *The New York Times* (1941),

than to any minuet or tango ever written, and the most cherished of them all is already almost as unimpeachable a classic as Yankee Doodle or Turkey in the Straw. . . . The effect [of “St. Louis Blues”] was that of a tornado, a revolution and an epidemic combined. It swept out from Memphis across the country in all directions, and across the oceans to Berlin, Cape Town, Vladivostok and Shanghai. (24)

Mythmaking often provokes reaction by, or on behalf of, those it would displace from history. When New Orleans Jazz pioneer Jelly Roll Morton heard Handy described on a 1938 Ripley’s *Believe It Or Not*! radio broadcast as “The Father of Jazz” as well as blues, he was furious. “Mr. Handy cannot prove anything in music that he has created,” he fumed in an open letter to Ripley’s, later published in *Downbeat* magazine. “He has possibly taken advantage of some unprotected material that floats around . . .” (qtd. in Nager 31). Coming as it did when Handy was in the process of dictating *Father of the Blues*, Morton’s accusation may well have provoked Handy to detail with apparent scrupulousness, as he does in a chapter entitled “Blue Diamonds in the Rough: Polished and Mounted,” the various bits of “unprotected material” he had collected and transmuted into profitable blue gems. Surely, too, the controversy led him to foreground his own exploitation at the hands of a duplicitous white music publisher, who, after convincing him that “Memphis Blues” (1912) was not selling, purchased the copyright from him for fifty dollars and deprived him of twenty-eight years’ worth of subsequent royalties. One of the only places in *Father of the Blues* where Handy admits to what he calls “bitterness in my heart” concerns this bungled deal: “While I was getting the praise, another man owned the copyright to Memphis Blues and was getting the money. . . . however,” he continues, with characteristic sweet reasonableness, “I determined to swallow that resentment like a true philosopher, set my head to new things, and see if I couldn’t do better next time. In fact, a bee was already buzzing in my bonnet” (116). “St. Louis Blues” was this bee.

Yet even as Handy achieved a kind of apotheosis as a popular songwriter and “America’s most affectionately regarded Negro,” his career continued to be shadowed by two interrelated charges, both of which have exerted a lingering effect on his reputation: lack of originality (he neither lived nor wrote the “real” blues) and immoderate profit (“real” bluesmen don’t get rich). “Even to claim, or accept, the title of ‘Father of the Blues,’ as W. C. Handy has done, is as absurd as it is presumptuous,” wrote Rudi Blesh in his 1946 jazz history *Shining Trumpets*. Handy, “from the time of his youth [seems] to have been in the un-Negroid tradition . . . a tradition that has always aimed to ‘disinfect’ Afro-American music by Europeanizing it” (Nager 31). In *After the Ball* (1974), a history of American popular music, Ian Whitcomb dismisses Handy as the “Stenographer of the Blues,” an appellation linking his presumed lack of originality with musical literacy: Real bluesmen don’t read music, Whitcomb implies, they create music, the authentic country blues that
educated imposters like Handy then proceed to labeling “primitive music” before transcribing and profiting from it (Nager 31). Despite his admitted blunder with the “Memphis Blues” copyright, Handy’s cardinal sin seems to have been that he found a way of profiting from a musical form whose rural Southern practitioners (and juke-joint audiences) have traditionally been defined by their subjection to white economic exploitation, cotton sharecropping in particular. Handy took care of business; this alone made him a curiosity among blues practitioners, even to the favorably inclined. “Obstetrician of the Blues” The New York Times headlined its daily review of Father of the Blues, adding: “William Christopher Handy wrote several very good songs and one unkillable one, St. Louis Blues; but essentially he was less a musician than a good businessman whose business was music” (72).

Far from a sign of inauthenticity, however, Handy’s stubborn pursuit of profit within a blues context places him squarely in the African-American tradition: blues music as an escape from the “blues” of abject poverty and sharecropping economics. “The performance that sings of abysmal poverty and deprivation,” notes Baker, reminding us of this paradox, “may be compensated by sumptuous food and stimulating beverage at a country picnic, amorous favors from an attentive listener, enhanced Afro-American communality, Yankee dollars from representatives of record companies traveling the South in search of blues as commodifiable entertainment” (9).

Struggling to make his mark as a songwriter at a turn-of-the-century moment when sound recording was in its infancy and sheet music was the dominant form, Handy was the precursor of these Yankee blues-scouts. While there is no record of his ever having paid any of the “dusky bards” and “husky duskies” whose stray snatches of melody found their way into his blues compositions, his profitable incorporation of Mississippi blues into his dance band’s repertoire registers in Father of the Blues as a kind of liberating euphoria, an epiphany of self-making: “I have intimated that silver money had always been plentiful in the Delta; now at last we began to come in for our share of it” (79). This particular epiphany—the profitable intersection of creativity and commerce, an earned lyric getaway from economic subjection—was one that Mississippi bluesmen themselves knew well. Guitarist Big Joe [Williams] changed my life and I was glad of it,” insisted David Honeyboy Edwards after returning home from his first out-of-state blues ramble in the early 1930s. “I didn’t want to be in that field from sun to sun, can to can’t, can see to can’t see. I was going to make it with the guitar. I could make more money playing than picking cotton” (45). Making no money as a novice street singer with the hymns and spirituals he’d learned in church, B.B. King shifted to blues and watched the tips pour in. “That was my first lesson in marketing. I saw something about the relationship between money and music that I’m still seeing today. Real-life songs, where you feel the hurt and heat between man and woman, have cash value” (79).

Yet no amount of cash, as Father of the Blues makes clear, could wholly remove Handy from subjection to the violences and humiliations of Jim Crow—the origins of blues feelings, as it were, generated by racial rather than sexual hurt and heat, and ones that would reaffirm his fraternity with a wider community of blues performers. At precisely the moment “St. Louis Blues” is beginning to pay off in the form of stupendous royalties, Handy’s career as a Memphis bandleader requires yet another out-of-town trip:

... here I was again, trotting off to a six-dollar engagement in a particularly backward part of Arkansas after a week-end which had brought nearly six thousand dollars. It wouldn’t be easy to take all the little digs that one suffered in that sort of element. It would be hard to be tactful when com-

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manded to play two extra hours or to do this or that monkey business for the delight of our audience, but even engagements like this had been welcome when the sock was empty, and perhaps it wasn’t right to scorn them now. I made up my mind to endure it cheerfully. Every dime added to what you had made the going easier and lessened the headaches.

We lived through this engagement, and Wednesday morning I returned home to find another surprise waiting. The Emerson Company had sent a check for an additional thousand dollars. What I did with this check, together with the larger ones, can best be described as wish fulfillment. (135)

Handy’s stance of tactical submission in the service of capital-hungry creative self-making is in full display here. As before, his tone—“backward,” “little digs,” “tactful,” “monkey business,” “headaches”—serves to minimize and contain both the ridicule and potential violence his bandleading requires him to endure at the hands of what appears to be a low-class white audience, and the intensity of his own reactions. What counts, finally, is to live through the engagement and see one’s economic wishes (and all possible ancillary wishes) fulfilled. What Handy seems to reject, in other words, is precisely what Richard Wright embraces in Black Boy: the blues-attitude identified by Ellison, in which one “keep[s] the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness.” Handy dances lightly across the jagged grain, rather than fingering it until he bleeds: the blues as a kind of bourgeois stoicism, a self-discipline in the service of uplift, rather than the blues as existential revolt. Existential revolt is, as I shall describe in a moment, also a mode Handy explores, but a passage such as this—characterized by emotional restraint verging on outright servility—does raise the disquieting question of what precisely Handy’s blues feelings are. Where is the rage at suffered indignity, the paralyzing terror at the “white death,” the lust and jealousy and overwhelming desire to flee, the familiar obsessional miasma that swirls furiously through the works of Wright, Himes, and others in the “Blues School of American Literature”? If the blues, as Handy insists, “were conceived in aching hearts,” where is Handy’s heartfelt ache? Does Father of the Blues deserve to be called a blues autobiography, for all its evident connection with the musical form? Why not a show-business memoir, or a “middle-class success story” of the sort invoked—and rejected as uninteresting—by Stephen Butterfield in Black Autobiography in America?9

The only sustained attempt to define blues autobiography, as it happens, explicitly excludes Father of the Blues. In a 1975 essay entitled “To Be Black and Blue: The Blues Genre in Black American Autobiography,” Elizabeth Schultz categorizes Handy, instead, as a “testimonial autobiographer,” along with Matthew Henson, Mary Church Terrell, Booker T. Washington, Angela Davis, Malcolm X, and others, and in opposition to “blues autobiographers” such as Himes, Wright, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson, Ann Moody, Claude Brown, Maya Angelou, Zora Neale Hurston, and J. Saunders Redding. What distinguishes blues autobiographies from testimonial autobiographies is, according to Schultz, neither the representation of blues musicians and textual incorporation of blues lyric forms (by which standard Hughes, Handy, and Hurston might well be grouped together), nor the evolution of the Jim Crow South at its most nakedly oppressive (by which standard Handy might arguably be grouped with Himes, Wright, Moody, and Angelou), but rather the imputed generic origin of each form, and a quality of heightened, searching consciousness that manifests itself, in the case of blues autobiography, as an open-endedness of plot. Testimonial autobiographies such as Handy’s, Schultz claims, derive from the written tradition of slave narratives; blues autobiographies, by contrast, derive from the oral
slave histories, of the sort recorded by the WPA in the 1930s.

From this initial and highly problematic binary, Schultz deduces a series of categorical oppositions. A testimonial autobiographer “strives to convey accuracy of historical fact,” whereas a blues autobiographer “seems primarily concerned with the emotional accuracy of expression” (129). A testimonial autobiography “is concerned with the objectification and development of a specific conviction,” whereas a blues autobiography “is concerned with the process of discovering meaning, a process synonymous with the discovery of consciousness, with the reader implicitly being engaged in this process” (115). The testimonial autobiographer, like the purveyor of a traditional black church testimonial, aims to describe “his experience of conversion and salvation . . . [and] to bring his audience to a like conversion and salvation” (112); the blues autobiographer, on the other hand, “seems to leave his life history open-ended, resolving it only by a continued willingness to embrace reality” (116).

While Schultz’s schema may help to clarify several distinctive features of Father of the Blues, it readily deconstructs itself on the question of generic origins. If testimonial autobiographies derive ultimately from written slave narratives, why place Handy in this category, since his autobiography was, like Malcolm X’s, spoken out loud to an amanuensis, very much in the fashion of slave oral histories? In light of the recent flowering of as-told-to autobiographies by blues musicians such as Willie Dixon (1989), Mance Lipscomb (1993), B. B. King (1996), and David Honeyboy Edwards (1997), not to mention Mezz Mezzrow’s Really the Blues (1946) and Big Bill Broonzy’s Big Bill Blues (1955), the term blues autobiography seems increasingly untenable when used, as Schultz uses it, to describe a subset of African-American autobiographies that bear no discernable relationship with actual blues performance practices: apprenticeship to elders, the forging of a personal style, mastery of a repertoire, travel in pursuit of musical labors, the material conditions of those labors, the sources of musical creativity, and participation in moments of individual and collective musical catharsis. Father of the Blues is a foundational blues text in each of these respects; it stands, arguably, at the beginning of the blues autobiographical tradition, concerned as it is with representing the turn-of-the-century moment in which blues music was emerging from a welter of black popular musics, and with its author’s (and subject’s) crucial role in that process.

Yet Schultz’s distinction between testimonial and blues autobiographies and her consignment of Father of the Blues to the former category is not, for all that, entirely misguided. Her confusions are grounded in precisely what makes the political valence of Handy’s text so difficult to decode, which is to say Handy’s willingness to swallow his pride and submit to the white South for the sake of survival and long-term profit, while simultaneously “fighting it out,” engaging in selective tactical resistance. Submission demands a choking-off of feeling and consciousness, at least temporarily; profits accumulate to he who coolly calculates risks and rewards. Fighting it out, by contrast, is an expression of heightened feeling, a violent flowering of consciousness. Father of the Blues is, I would suggest, a hybrid text: both testimonial autobiography and blues autobiography, according to Schultz’s definitions. As a testimonial autobiography, it is both a conversion narrative (Handy’s “discovery” and embrace of blues music) and the inspiring story of a freedom quest, the self-directed uplift of an Alabama black boy from the clutches of Jim Crow into apotheosis as the acknowledged “Father” of a treasured American song form and embrace by an interracial brotherhood of Tin Pan Alley songwriters. As a blues autobiography (in Schultz’s terms), it is simultaneously concerned with depicting what might be called

"MAKE MY GETAWAY": THE BLUES LIVES OF BLACK MINSTRELS IN HANDY’S FATHER OF THE BLUES
the “passional subtext” of the testimonial autobiography: the jarring vio-
lences and humiliations suffered by Handy and other members of his
younger black generation under the manifest insanity of Jim Crow, the tears
and rages that demanded, and finally found, creative outlet. At crucial
points, in other words, Handy-as-narrator is less concerned with the testi-
monial autobiographer’s “accuracy of historical fact” than with the subter-
ranean, felt history of his blues-inaugurating generation, the blues autobiog-
rapher’s “emotional accuracy of expression.” If *Father of the Blues*
moves strongly in its final pages toward racial reconciliation and the
paternal benediction “God Bless America,” then it begins, significantly,
with the implacable sobs of a Southern black boy.

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Living in a world of such amazing cruelty,” Handy proclaims of his black folk subjects at
one point with a characteristic mixture of empathy and condescension, “bewil-
dered by the doings of such men as Joe Turney, this simple people either sang
or played whatever came into their minds” (*Father* 146). Turney, the inspira-
tion for “Joe Turner Blues,” was a
white lawman who became a black folk
legend during his tenure (1892-1896)
for the midnight runs in which he con-
voyed chained gangs of young black
men from Memphis jails to the state
penitentiary in Nashville and prison
farms along the Mississippi. “Joe
Turner Blues” began, according to
Handy, as a spontaneous folk creation, an
upwelling of grief among the
women whose loved ones Turney had
just carried off. “That night, perhaps,
there would be weeping and wailing
among the dusky belles. If one of them
chanced to ask a neighbor what had
become of the sweet good man, she
was likely to receive the pat reply,
‘They tell me Joe Turner’s come and
gone’” (*Father* 146). “Joe Turner
Blues” enacted, in other words, not the
lyric getaway made by the female pro-
tagonist of “St. Louis Blues” in that
song’s second stanza, but its obverse: a
lyric *takeaway*, in which a black man is
forcibly cast into oblivion by a figure of
white authority, leaving a grieving
woman in his wake:

He come wid forty links of chain,
Oh Lawdy!
Come wid forty links of chain,
Oh Lawdy!
Got my man and gone.

*Father of the Blues* is, among other
things, Handy’s attempt to act as a cen-
tral clearing house for tales of blues
grief. A literary blues singer, he both
bears empathetic witness to his genera-
tion’s confrontation with “amazing
cruelty” and lives out his own particu-
lar variant of it. His life-story begins
with a startling, inarticulate howl of
pain. “Where the Tennessee River, like
a silver snake, winds her way through
the red clay hills of Alabama,” he
intones,

sits high on these hills my home town,
Florence. Here I came into the world,

as my parents often told, “squalling for
six months straight,” from the six-
months’ colic. They used to place the
date of some particular event as “so
many years before, or so many years
after surrender.” This of course
referred to Lee’s surrender to Grant,
which resulted in the emancipation of
my race. I began exercising my vocal
organs “eight years after surrender”; to
be exact, November 16, 1873. (1)

The future father of the blues enters the
world as a squalling incarnation of his
race’s need to “[sing or play] whatever
came into their minds,” a form of emo-
tional release under trying circum-
stances. This need is provoked in
Handy’s case by a physical ailment,
colic, that bespeaks a spiritual dis-ease
connected with two distinct and disil-
usioning moments in African-
American history.

As a child of the later
Reconstruction, Handy attained young
manhood in the 1890s, when the
promise of emancipation—self-owner-
ship and uplift—was being severely
eroded and in many cases extinguished by a relentless white campaign to disenfranchise, economically subjugate, and terrorize a captive black population. Handy’s squalling inability to digest the historical moment into which he has been born anticipates these post-Reconstruction disillusionments; it also enmeshes him, as his autobiography later makes clear, in the terrors of Reconstruction itself, a second-hand legacy he plumbs with the help of a black minstrel he encounters during his Mahara’s days. “He gave me cold chills,” Handy remembers, invoking a familiar blues trope:

His eyes were deep-set and filled with weird shadows. His name was William Malone, and he had been earning his salt by playing up and down the old Streckfus line between St. Paul and St. Louis. A kindly, self-educated boy. I prevailed on him to join our show, and he and I became berthmates. Then it was that I discovered his unearthly affliction. Periodically during the night a strange, tortured sound would escape his lips. I cannot describe the sound. It was as if the woe of the entire world was suddenly rolled upon the lonely young man. Over and over again, as long as he slept, this moan was repeated. I was so disturbed I asked him if he were aware of it. He assured me that he was and gave me his own explanation.

Back in Reconstruction days his father had been active in Mississippi politics. The Klan had set about to clip his wings. They hounded him with threats. They sent him notes signed with blood. Often hooded men sprang from the thickets and attempted to pounce upon him. The poor ex-slave tried hard to stand his ground, but the odds were great. As fear grew, he formed the habit of sleeping beneath his cabin floor. Alone in the tiny room above, his young wife cried herself to sleep. From one night to the next they lived in mortal anguish of what might happen to the man, the wife and the child that was waiting to be born. Eventually all three escaped safely to Washington, but the infant was marked for life. This, Malone explained, was the cause of the low moaning that I heard so often. He was the child of that harassed pair. (67-68)

Malone’s nocturnal haunting, a blues-like inheritance from his father, is “the nightmare of those minstrel days” rendered literally. If Handy himself is able, when white violence threatens, to escape into the “get-away” compartment of Mahara’s Pullman and re-compose himself, Malone’s father can do little more than cower in terror beneath the floorboards. His hideout, although it does finally facilitate his escape, reads like a ghastly parody of the liberating “black (W)hole” described by Baker. Malone, scarred in the womb by his mother’s bottomless grief (an echo of Handy’s infantile “squalling”), is frozen to the scene of traumatic repetition his dream-life has become—the transgenerational aftermath of Mississippi’s post-Emancipation collapse into Klan violence, but also a marker of contemporary racial woes, the “amazing cruelty” Handy refers to in his Joe Turner anecdote.

The “strange, tortured sound” that escapes Malone’s lips and so disturbs Handy finds an immediate analogue in the polymorphous tortures wrought by Southern lynch mobs on their groaning victims during the period. The 1893 lynching of Henry Smith in Paris, Texas, described by Ida B. Wells in A Red Record, offers one example:

The [lynchers] then gathered about the Negro as he lay fastened to the torture platform and thrust hot irons into his quivering flesh. It was horrible—the man dying by slow torture in the midst of smoke from his own burning flesh. Every groan from the fiend, every contortion of his body was cheered by the thickly packed crowd of 10,000 persons. The mass of beings 600 yards in diameter, the scaffold being the center. After burning the feet and legs, the hot irons—plenty of fresh ones being at hand—were rolled up and down Smith’s stomach, back, and arms. Then the eyes were burned out and irons were thrust down his throat.

(29)

The haunted representative of a younger black generation forced to dwell in daily contemplation of such a fate, Malone has the blues without possessing an articulate way of expressing them, a spiritual condition that Trudier Harris has termed “no outlet for the
blues.” Malone’s moans are isolating, imprisoning—the abject moans of the lynching victim, as it were, rather than the cathartic moans of a blues singer like Ma Rainey. Ma “wouldn’t have to sing any words,” recalled poet Sterling Brown of Rainey; “she would moan, and the audience would moan with her. She had them in the palm of her hand” (qtd. in Lieb 17). What distinguishes Rainey’s moan of 1920 from Malone’s of 1900 (or Henry Smith’s of 1893) is the emergence and development, in precisely those decades, of a fully articulate blues culture within which a meaningful blues moan could be uttered.

By “writing” the blues large as he did—snatching folk-blues melodies out of the air and transforming them into immensely popular sheet music compositions—Handy was as responsible as anybody for this cultural transformation. It was a generational complaint he helped birth, the repressed collective cry of the black minstrel brethren whom he characterized in Father of the Blues as “a wistful but aspiring generation of dusky singers and musicians” (69). Wistful is typical Handyian understatement, belied not just by William Malone’s preternatural moans, but by Handy’s own youthful grief, the memory of which is prompted by his later encounter with the racist campaign rhetoric of Mississippi politician James Vardaman: “As a schoolboy in Florence I had gone home, buried my head in a pillow and wept after listening to sentiments like these uttered from the courthouse steps by a politician of the same stripe” (81). As racist reaction deepened across the South during the 1890s with the passage of Jim Crow legislation, Handy’s boyhood despair—not to mention the infant outburst with which his autobiography opens—found uncanny reflection in the world of touring black entertainment. In 1897, according to the Freeman, one hit on the circuit was “Harry Waters’ ‘Cry Baby’ song . . . [a] lifelike imitation of a squalling youngster. He is with [a show called]

‘Darkest America’ ” (“Note” 5). The blues, in Ann Douglas’s apt formulation, “bore witness to a moment of immense and historic disillusion” (401), a disillusion as visible in the desperate inventiveness of black minstrels and vaudevillians of the 1890s as in the letters published in black newspapers in the aftermath of lynching’s depressingly common spectacles.

“When I survey the Southern States of America,” wrote one correspondent to the Freeman from Pensacola, Florida, in 1893,

and view the surroundings of the Negro, comparing his advantages with his disadvantages, I ask myself the question, are not the Negroes in Hell? Hell is only a place of horror and punishment. How much more horror can hell have for its victims than the Southern States has for the Negroes? We are falsely accused, ridiculed, imprisoned for trifles, lynched on false accusations, and robbed of the rights of citizenship. This is hell in the first degree. . . . We must stand up for our rights, though we die. Have race pride, respect ourselves and make others respect us. (Perkins 3)

Blues wistfulness grounded in a yearning for such civil respect sometimes found outlet in black minstrelsy.

“George Wilson, of Sam T. Jack’s Creoles,” read an 1897 item in the Freeman, “has written a topical song, entitled ‘What We Would do, if the Law would Allow Us,’ which he is singing with much success” (“Stage” 23 Jan.: 6). So-called “coon” songs, even as they recycled demeaning minstrel images of chicken-stealing, watermelon-devouring plantation Negroes, were another way in which touring black performers in the later 1890s voiced their generational complaint. In songwriter’s Ben Harney’s “Mister Johnson, Turn Me Loose” (1896), the “first ragtime song to become a major hit,” according to Philip Furia, “. . . listeners were delighted not only by the syncopated rhythm but by the idiomatic plea of the caricatured black to ‘Mister Johnson’ (slang for the police)”:

Oh, Mister Johnson, turn me loose!
Don’t take me to the calaboose!
Harney, arguably a mulatto Kentuckian who passed for white throughout his songwriting career, seems to have adapted his material from African-American originals first heard on the street, as did Hart Wand ("Dallas Blues" [1912]), Leroy "Lasses" White ("Nigger Blues" [1912]), and several early white blues songwriters. Harney's song was introduced to the Broadway stage, in any case, by white "coon" shouter May Irwin in her 1896 show Courted Into Court, along with Ernest Hogan's soon-to-be hit "All Coons Look Alike to Me" (Jasen and Jones 32-33). Yet what might seem like a case of black social pain leavened with comedy for interracial profit by Harney and Irwin was soon reappropriated by African-American performers, its problematic racial politics transformed into liberating catharsis for black vaudeville audiences. "Mattie Phillips is sure to make a name for herself," noted the Freeman of a youthful singer with Black Patti's Troubadours in 1898. "She is a dashing octroon from North Carolina, and her fancy steps in the first act, when she sings 'Mr. Johnson, Turn Me Loose,' set the audience wild. . . . She is a bright, level-headed young woman not out of her teens" ("Stage" 30 Apr.: 5).

". . . all the best talent of that generation came down the same drain," insists Handy in Father of the Blues, a statement which reflects both the unifying effect of shared experience on a generation's consciousness—above all, a yearning to be "turned loose" from the blanketing violations of Jim Crow—and the ill-repute in which the boisterous black minstrels were held by what Handy acknowledged to be "a large section of upper-crust Negroes" (33). Handy participated in the flowering of this consciousness not just as a performer, songwriter, and bandleader, but also as a devoted reader and distributor of black newspapers who could not help but be aware of outrages young black men were being subjected to, and bitterly protesting, across the South. "As a sideline in Clarksdale, [Mississippi]," he relates,

I did a kind of bootleg business in Northern Negro newspapers and magazines. Not only did I supply the colored folks of the town, but also got the trade of the farmers, the croppers and the hands from the outlying country. They would come to my house on their weekly visits to the city, give me the high sign, and I would slip them their copies of the Chicago Defender, the Indianapolis Freeman or the Voice of the Negro. This may sound like a tame enough enterprise to those whose memories are short, but oldsters of those parts will not have to be told that I was venturing into risky business. Negro newspapers were not plentiful in those days, and their circulation in cities like Clarksdale was looked upon with strong disfavor by certain of the local powers. But because I was favorably known to most of the white folks as the leader of the band that gave the weekly concerts on the main street, they never suspected me of such dark business as distributing Northern literature to Negroes of the community. (79-80)

Here the mask of the "reliable" permits Handy to play the role of revolutionary member of a generational vanguard promulgating resistance and rebellion in the face of death. If Handy's own language—"risky business," "strong disfavor"—is something less than apocalyptic, the black voices that spoke out of the pages of the newspapers he read and distributed were exactly that. An aggrieved, impassioned, violently assertive "New Negro" was being born in the 1890s as the blues' future father came of age. "As a young man of the race," wrote one contemporary to the Freeman in the days following Henry Smith's 1893 lynching,

I do not feel or yield that deference to the so called superior race that did and still does some of my ancestors. I am one of the great army of black youth of this country who feels with the intuitive instinct of the oppressed, that a crisis is imminent. I feel that the youth of which I am one, is to be the savior of the Negro race. Each moment the plan of action becomes more unified. Two formulas are to be chosen: from one prayers for a peaceful solution, begging for a consideration of the Golden
rule by all mankind, the other craves
the application of force let it be a war
of extermination if it must be, for it is
better to die fighting for liberty, if
death as a sacrifice means a probable
rectifying of the ills done the living.
("Texas" 3)

"The mature man," observes
Georges Gusdorf in words that would
seem to distinguish Handy-as-autobi-
ographer from such youthful apocalyp-
ticism, "or the man already old who
projects his life into narrative would
thus provide witness that he has not
existed in vain; he chooses not revolu-
tion but reconciliation..." (39). But if
"the miracle of [Handy's] own career"
(67) generates hope for racial reconcili-
ation and black social progress, as
Barton has claimed, then Handy is
equally concerned in Father of the
Blues with depicting what might be
called the furious undercurrents of
minstrel life—not reconciliation but
revolution—as he and his great army
of black youth lived it.

Nowhere is this more evident than
in his account of the 1902 lynching of a
fellow performer who refuses to defer
to the "so-called superior race":

Sudden, stark tragedy sometimes
darkened our minstrel days. There was
Louis Wright, for instance, who played
a trombone in the boys' band. Later,
though still in short pants, he was ele-
vated to my division. An unusually
talented musician, this slim, sensitive
boy resented insult with every fiber of
his being. He would fight anyone any
time and with any weapon within
reach. In our company we understood
his fierce pride; we knew how to treat
him.

Later, however, when the Georgia
Minstrels lured him away from us, he
didn't fare so well. They were in a
Missouri town and Louis, on the way
to the theatre with his female compan-
ion, was snowballed by some white
hoodlums. He retaliated swiftly, laying
down a blast of curses.

That night a mob came back-stage at
the theatre. They had come to lynch
Louis. In his alarm the sharp-tempered
boy drew a gun and fired into the
crowd. The mob scattered promptly,
but they did not turn from their pur-
purpose. They reassembled in the railroad
yards, near the special car of the min-
strel company. This time their number

was augmented by officers. When the
minstrels arrived, the whole company
was arrested and brutally flogged dur-
ing the questioning that followed, but
no squeal was forthcoming. In time,
however, Louis Wright was recogni-
tized. The law gave him to the mob,
and in almost less time than it takes to
tell it they had done their work. He
was lynched, his tongue cut out and
his body shipped to his mother in
Chicago in a pine box. (43)

Wright's fate is a gruesome travesty of
Baker's "black (W)hole": the African-
American artist brutally silenced,
boxed in, obliterated. When one con-
siders the fact, noted by ragtime histo-
rian Edward A. Berlin, that Wright's
body was actually shipped C.O.D. to
his mother, the episode would seem an
apt illustration of Roger Rosenblatt's
claim that "in black autobiography the
outer reality in which heroes move is
so massive and absolute in its craziness
that any one person's individual idio-
syncrasies seem almost dull in their
normality" (124). 11

Wright's racial pride, depicted by
Handy as a potentially troublesome
but entirely understandable idiosyn-
crasy, turns out to be Handy's own.
Instead of raging at Wright's lynchers
or mourning his dead friend, however,
Handy conveys his reactions indirectly,
answering the Wright episode in the
next paragraph with another tale of
black minstrel beleaguerment:

One day in a Texas town I began to
think that my turn was next. While
playing a cornet solo in the public
square during the noon concert, I sud-
denly turned around to discover a rifle
pointed at my eye. I ignored the threat,
playing as if nothing was happening.
A few moments later, the drums rum-
bling as we began the march back to
the theatre, a gang of cowboys
appeared and began roping our walk-
ing gents with their lassos. A swarm of
rowdy boys joined in the fun and
threw rocks down the bell of the big
bass horn. Then the kids turned on the
drums. They pelted our drums so vig-
ously the noise sounded like the rat-
a-tat-tat of a machine-gun. I was fur-
ious and stoutly refused to play a note
during the parade. We marched faster
than usual, but we kept our ranks.
Later, Mahara complimented me
Handy’s pride is every bit as fierce as Wright’s, although it expresses itself not as outright violence against his white tormentors but as a furious refusal to entertain them, to play “their” Negro minstrel—a refusal they may not, in fact, have decoded as the insurrectionary gesture Handy intended. What a modest rebellion! Yet Handy’s infrapolitics play loud and clear to, of all people, his supportive white employer. That Handy would deliberately note Mahara’s approval of his wildcat strike is one more example of the paradox that is Father of the Blues, a text as concerned with preaching interracial cooperation—indeed, praising white paternalism—as it is with documenting racist white violence and prideful black resistance.

White violence and black resistance, however, remain keynotes of Handy’s minstrel days. The interlocutor of Mahara’s Minstrels, for example, George L. Moxley, although “white in appearance,” was “by birth and at heart a Kentucky Negro,” according to Handy, and had risked his life repeatedly by “passing” with white minstrel groups. “W. A. Mahara was the only Minstrel Company I traveled with,” Moxley wrote Handy, “but I put on an Elks’ Minstrel once in Shreveport and one in Dayton, both ofays. They would have hung me in Shreveport had they known that I was colored, and the same is true in plenty of other places” (39). Sometimes, as here, valor among black minstrels consisted of exercising discretion and living to fight another day. “Orange was the Texas town we dreaded most,” confessed Handy, relating one such episode:

Whenever it became known to the home town mob that our show was routed their way, they would sit up all night waiting for the train to pass. Their conception of wild, he-man fun was to riddle our car with bullets as it sped through their town. Our strategy was to extinguish the lights and lie quietly on the floor. Fortunately none of our company ever got killed during these assaults. (44)

Our car is the significant phrase here: What made black minstrelsy uniquely nightmarish in the 1890s was the continual subjection of black material success to the deadly whims of white envy and roguery. Like blueswoman Ma Rainey, who wore diamond tiaras and a necklace made of gold pieces, the minstrels transformed their bodies, not to mention their mobile accommodations, into spectacular emblems of black uplift—inspiring to black audiences, potentially infuriating to local whites. “Our special palace car, which has just left the shops of Barnie & Smith, at Dayton, is a thing of beauty,” wrote Fred W. Simpson, a trombonist with Oliver P. Scott’s Refined Negro Minstrels, to the Freeman in 1898, “and is being commented on by the admiring crowds as they gaze on it” (“Stage” 5 Jul.: 5). Four months later he bragged, “Our new parade clothes came in Ottawa, Ill., and to say that the ‘gang’ created a furor when the parade went out is but putting it mild. We simply captured the natives. Our overcoats are a dark green, box back with two rows of pearl buttons, and the hats are pink silk with a green silk band” (“Stage” 5 Nov. 1898: 5).

Black minstrels were projecting themselves across the South as a glorious, enviable spectacle during a decade, it must be remembered, when white racist reaction was concerned precisely with restricting black freedom of movement through public space. Guns were the preeminent enforcer of Jim Crow’s freshly legislated hierarchies, even as private Pullman cars (“get-aways” included) were a crucial way in which the black minstrels resisted both. “On Railroads in the South—Where Every White Man Carries a Revolver” read the headline of an investigative report in the New York Age dated March 29, 1890:

From Nashville your correspondent took the L&N Railroad for New Orleans... I thought of that infernal decision of the United States Supreme
Court rendered March 2, 1890, claiming that a State had the right to compel railroads to run Jim Crow cars for colored people. . . . The Afro-American in the South is entirely controlled by the white man. He is subject to insults and outrages in every walk of life; if he appears as a man, truthfully speaking he is in one respect a complete slave—that is, he is a slave to the will of the white man. . . . At Evergreen, Ala., a colored man came aboard and went in the closet. The conductor did not pass through until the train left the next stopping place, Castleberry. He then looked in and discovered the man. The train was running very slowly, about 6 miles per hour. Instead of the conductor stopping the train and putting the man off, he first struck him in the face as hard as he could with his fist. Then he took a large handled broom by the porter to sweep the smoker, and broke that over the man’s head. I am positive if that man had been white, the conductor would not have struck him, but would have stopped the train and put him off. This illustrates just how colored men and women are treated on railroads in the South. I could recite at least 25 instances of insults and outrages, that I have seen from Henderson, Ky. to San Antonio, Texas, and all committed upon the colored man and woman. But we must get every Afro-American in a position to protect himself before we can expect to compel others to respect him. Lee surrendered because Gen’l Grant had more bullets, guns, powder and more men to use than he. I observed from New Orleans to San Antonio that almost every white man has the ready revolver in his hip pocket.

Increasingly agitated demands for black self-defense culminated, shortly after Handy joined Mahara’s in 1896, with an extraordinary editorial headline in the *Freeman*: “Get Guns! Negroes, Get Guns!” The words were those of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, whose thunderous declarations against lynching and calls for a black outmigration to Africa in recent years had made him a familiar figure to the *Freeman*’s readers—and the paper’s editorial writers, who expressed qualified support for Turner’s program:

Get guns! Negroes, get guns! was the fire brand and bow expression that fell from the pen of the able and eloquent Bishop Turner, when in a mental frenzy over the wrongs heaped on his race in the last seven years, which wrongs reached their climacteric a few weeks ago when two colored men were murdered while the A.M.E conference was in session in Louisiana. We can not advise this very lawless mode of procedure, yet from the tenor of affairs some forcible methods of bringing to terms those who insult the manhood of the race by putting end to lives in these most disgraceful ways, should not be too tardy in obtaining.

(10 Apr. 1897: 4)

There can be little doubt that Handy and his fellow minstrels knew of Turner’s inflammatory exhortation; two weeks after its publication in the *Freeman*, a “Note from Mahara’s Minstrels” appeared in the paper claiming that “through California we got The Freeman quite often which is always welcome in our company” (5). More surprising, perhaps, is that Handy and the others should quickly have adopted Turner’s “forcible methods” as a way of defending their manhood, and their wives’ and lovers’ respectability, from insult.

The episode, related in *Father of the Blues*, takes place shortly after Handy has escaped lynching in Tennessee with the help of the “get-away.” Now, accompanied by his reluctant wife, he and his minstrel band are about to drum up business for the evening show in Tyler, Texas, with their usual noontime parade when an “excited doctor” who has just examined one of their ailing bandmates runs into the town square, arms flailing:

“Stop! Stop it!” he cried. “Stop this damn music.” I turned in alarm. The members of my band began to look foolish and unnecessary. Presently, turning to the assembled crowd, the doctor added, “Ladies and gentlemen, these niggers have got the smallpox. If they don’t get out of town—and that right quick—we’ll lynch them all.”

The effect was electrical. Stunned for a moment, we quickly regained our wits well enough to fall into step with the rat-a-tat-tat of George Reeves’ snare drum and commence a double-quick to the car. In another jiffy an engine was hitched to our car and we
were taken to a siding on the outskirts of town. County officers came a short while later to inform us that the appearance of one more case of smallpox among us would be the signal for them to burn the car and carry out the doctor’s lynching threat. (47-48)

“Foolish and unnecessary” indeed: *Father of the Blues* is a case study of an art form, black minstrelsy, fragmenting under the pressures of history. A free-ranging black male presence, looming in the white Southern imagination of the 1890s as a kind of deadly disease that could only be kept in check through lynching—with-burning—Vardaman would compare the “brutish negro’s lust” to “the virus in the fangs of the coiled serpent” (qtd. in Holmes 122)—finds its exemplary objective correlative here in the form of smallpox. Where is the minstrel grin now, confronted as its supposed bearers are with the threat of extermination? The grin is replaced, in one of the more remarkable passages in *Father of the Blues*, with armed resistance and grim determination.

“During our enforced idleness,” writes Handy of the quarantine period, something told me to brush up on my shooting. In addition to the arsenal in the bottom of the car [the “get-away”], I had my own private collection of arms, a Winchester .44, a Smith and Wesson and a Colt revolver. The S.&W. had been bought especially for my wife, and during the lull I tried to teach her to shoot it. This proved to be a waste of time. She was too nervous to pull the trigger. At any rate, I built a fortress of cross-ties, and this became our protection by day as well as a bed by night.

We decided immediately that there would be greater safety, considering the tenseness of the situation, in sleeping in the open than remaining in the car. This met no opposition, but it led to a greater problem. Guards were thrown around our concentration camp. By sundown some of us began to be disturbed about the lack of privacy. We requested the guards to allow our women to walk the tracks down to the nearby woods. This was denied. Will Garland got his fighting clothes on immediately. He was in the midst of a romance with Nettie Goff, our lady trombonist, and he was willing to pit his gallantry against any opposition. My blood boiled too. Will and I grimly raided the arsenal, took positions and calmly instructed the women to take their walk. We invited the guards to oppose us, if they dared. They didn’t. As a matter of fact, their attitude softened after that. Some of them actually became friendly. (48-49)

There is high drama here, surely, but also an unexpected note of humor: At the very moment Handy and Garland are brilliantly embodying Bishop Turner’s rallying cry, “Negroes, get guns!”, Handy is quick to point out that armed resistance, too, is a way of making white friends! Yet white friends were very much what “America’s most affectionately regarded Negro” was hoping to make with the publication of *Father of the Blues*. As the line guards were thrown around our concentration camp may remind us, Americans black and white were, in 1941, on the verge of waging war against a dictator defined in large part by his racist, “un-American” persecution of the Jews—Jews who, like Irving Berlin with his recent hit “God Bless America,” dominated Tin Pan Alley and formed a not insignificant part of Handy’s anticipated readership.

By cushioning his description of armed black resistance within what is essentially a prisoner-of-war scenario, by further qualifying it as a kind of sentimental gallantry, Handy rendered it more palatable for a (Northern) white audience that might otherwise have shivered inwardly at the thought of infuriated black manhood asserting itself at gunpoint. “Handy makes neither much nor little of the racial question,” *The New York Times* assured its readers in 1941, “but he does refer to it on occasion. And now and again he speaks directly to Jews as well as Negroes, with a lack of bitterness, a fearlessness and dignity which lights up both the sins and the hopes of democracy” (“Obstetrician” 72). Yet the fury remains, for all that; slipping off his mask of dispassionate folklorist, Handy gives in to rage: “My blood boiled too.”
Boiling blood, infantile squalling, schoolboy tears, cold chills, and furious resentment—*Father of the Blues* enacts on the representative body of its narrator a kind of blues-revolt, the passionate crisis experienced by his fiercely assertive, upwardly mobile, yet grievously oppressed generation of young black Southern men. Two large questions now swim into view. First, can the rapid decline of black minstrelsy after the turn of the century be traced to this crisis, a painful and finally insupportable disjunction between the comic materials from which the minstrel show was assembled and the Southern nightmare the black minstrels (and their black public) were forced to endure? Second, can the simultaneous emergence of blues, a subcultural music that filtered into black vaudeville around 1909 before exploding into mainstream popularity with “Memphis Blues” (1912), “St. Louis Blues” (1914), and Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues” (1920), be attributed, at least in part, to the music’s provisional resolution of this disjunction: the supplanting of the minstrel grin, in the American popular imagination, by the bittersweet sadness, the wistfulness, but also the stoic pride, that underlay not just black minstrel life but most African-American lives at the nadir? Didn’t blues music, in other words, ultimately refigure the black image somewhat in the white mind, displacing it away from caricature (even as “coon” imagery resurfaced in early race-record advertisements) and toward an embattled grief markedly more in accord with black self-perception? Handy’s pronouncement about the blues being born “in aching hearts” may strike us today as trite, but its triteness is a function of the successful blues revolution Handy himself helped inaugurate. “. . . he did not create the blues,” argues black folklorist Willis Laurence James in this vein, “but he did create a place for them” (59). Just as Du Bois was able to establish, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, that black folk *did* in fact have souls, at a time when Charles Carroll (*The Negro a Beast* [1900]), Thomas Dixon (*The Leopard’s Spots* [1902]), and other racist expostulators on Negro “reversion” were insisting otherwise, so Handy served as an effective propagandist for a widespread current of African-American feeling—imprisoning despair backed with releasing euphoria—that the minstrel mask had previously hidden. The spirituals had worked some of this same territory, to be sure, but the spirituals, despite the best efforts of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and other touring choirs, had never achieved mass popularity of a magnitude enjoyed by Handy and his whistlable, hummable compositions; a more radical intervention was required.

When folklorist Dorothy Scarborough visited Handy in the early 1920s, after “St. Louis Blues” and the subsequent race-record craze had considerably refuegured American expressive geographies, Handy tried to clarify his revolution, unfinished though it was. “Handy said that the blues express the Negro’s twofold nature,” reported Scarborough,

> the grave and the gay, and reveal his ability to appear the opposite of what he is.

> “Most white people think that the Negro is always cheerful and lively,” he explained. “But he isn’t, though he may seem that way sometimes when he is most troubled. The Negro knows the blues as a state of mind, and that is why this music has that name.” (270)

Wearing the mask of partisan folklorist here, as he does so often, Handy distances himself from “the Negro” whose blues he and the other black minstrels knew all too well: not economic blues, particularly, but the blues of a violent subjection that gave the lie to a “freedom” grounded in one’s putative right to travel when and where one wished. A kind of tensed wistfulness—what Jasen and Jones call “this dual package of pain and strength” (236)—may have found its way into American popular song for the first time with the publication of “St. Louis Blues,” but the spirit of suppressed rebellion that underlay that bittersweet melancholy was
always more than the music could openly express. "If Bessie Smith had killed some white people," LeRoi Jones's Clay explodes in *Dutchman* (1964), "she wouldn't have needed that music" (1897). If the last generation of black minstrels hadn't been killed and almost killed by white Southerners on a daily basis—and been driven to take up arms—they wouldn't have needed that music either. The "nightmare of those minstrel days" begat, in Handy's case, a long-deferred dream of blues form that ultimately found voice in a song about bags packed and getaways made.

1. For more on dissatisfaction among black members of the U.S. armed forces during World War II, see Pomerance 165-83.

2. Arna Bontemps to Langston Hughes, 26 Jan. 1940. For more on jazz (although not blues) autobiographies as creative collaborations, see Harlos 146-60.

3. The term reliable was invoked by Henry Clay Bruce in his 1895 narrative *The New Man: Twenty-nine Years a Slave, Twenty-nine Years a Free Man* (see Andrews 81). The paradox underlying Handy's politics continued to operate in later years, long after his northward move. "... the thing that pleases me most," he wrote Mr. and Mrs. William Grant Still just after the Presidential Election of 1962, "is that, during the political campaign, we published a song, 'Hike With Ike' (Eisenhower and Nixon), which went all over the nation with five thousand letters stating why we published this song, and at my personal expense. As a result, had many congratulations from Republicans all over the nation..." Yet Handy's Republicanism, as he quickly made clear, was grounded in a family legacy of daringly progressive racial politics. "Monday, before election," he continued, "I rode in a motorcade. The car carried my name on a banner and someone threw pages from the New York Times dated October 25th, attacking Governor Dewey with their names signed, forgetting that New York under Governor Dewey is the first state in the Union to wipe out segregation and race discrimination by anti-discrimination laws. So, it was gratifying to hear that on Monday morning he announced over radio that I would appear on television at Astor Hotel supporting Eisenhower, and there he introduced me to say a few words. I made a short talk telling them about our song, 'Hike With Ike,' that I am a Republican by tradition born in Florence, Ala., the birthplace of the first Negro elected to Congress from the North, Oscar DePriest, and the home of James T. Rapier, congressman in Reconstruction Days. Many times my father told me how he helped hide Rapier from the Ku Klux an island in the Tennessee River until they could spirit him away to Washington. You will not see that in the papers, but it is in my books" (Southern, "In Retrospect, Part 2" 101-02).


5. Holmes cites the Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger 24 July 1903.

6. For a detailed discussion of "St. Louis Blues"—its composition, musical innovations, and public reception—see Jasen and Jones 235-39, 250. For a useful history of the St. Louis blues from its antebellum sources through the present day, see Ottenheimer 135-52.

7. In later years, Handy conflated the threat of police violence he encountered in St. Louis during his 1892 visit with the infamous East St. Louis race riot of 1917, an event he did not witness but would have followed in the black press. "I could, however," he wrote to William Grant Still in 1952, "paint you a most delightful picture of the only time I didn't have sufficient clothing, which happened in East St. Louis after I had worked two weeks at the Elliott-Frog and Switchworks, had pawned my watch for food and lodging to my employer, who stood in with corrupt East St. Louis Police. This man took my two weeks' wages, and kept my watch for the board and lodging, and wouldn't let me have my laundry and clothes. I went to the police for redress, and they threatened to take me in for vagrancy if I pressed the charge. If you don't think that in those days there was corruption in East St. Louis, you have but to do a little research. You will find that one of the most horrible race riots happened there, when they grabbed babies out of the Negro women's arms and dashed their brains out on the sidewalks. I am talking about East St. Louis, Illinois. So that made me walk with only five cents (5¢) in my pocket across East's Bridge, where I tore off my lousy shirt and threw it into the Mississippi River and spent my first night in St. Louis at the race track in a horse's stall. What a picture! The prince of poets said in effect, 'All the world's a stage,' and I was playing my part. 'The Great
Producer' had decreed that twenty-one years later I would write the 'St. Louis Blues' " (Southern, "In Retrospect, Part 2" 85-86).

8. Despite the extraordinary popularity of "St. Louis Blues" with Bessie Smith and many other classic blues and pop singers, the song was not widely covered by folk-blues performers (see Oliver 66-67).

9. "Revolutionary narratives are considered more worthwhile than middle-class success stories, not merely because they are revolutionary, but also because they are usually better written and their insight more profound" (Butterfield 6).

10. Harney, an important early ragtime pianist and composer, seems to have been of African-American extraction (according to Willie "The Lion" Smith and Eubie Blake), although he passed for white; his precise racial status is very much subject to debate. See Tallmadge; Oliver 50; Barlow and Morgan 24. I am indebted to Elliott Hurwitt for this clarification, and for his careful and provocative reading of an earlier draft of this essay.

11. For retelling of the Louis Wright episode, including the C.O.D. detail, see Berlin 124. Nine years after Wright's lynching, Odum relates —and mocks as fantastic—a proto-blues in which a black singer imagines his body being shipped home and turned away at the family door. "Ridiculous and amusing in its pathos," Odum writes, "If I die in Arkansas' is typical and representative. It is quite impressive when sung with feeling. The negro gets a kind of satisfaction in believing that he is utterly forlorn, yet begs to be delivered from such a condition. He sings,—

If I die in Arkansas,
Oh, if I die in Arkansas,
If I die in Arkansas,
Des ship my body to my mother-in-law.

I: If my mother refuse me, ship it to my pa. : I
I: If my pa refuse me, ship it to my girl. : I

If my girl refuse me, show me into de sea,
Where de fishes an' de whales make a fuss over me.

And then, after this wonderful rhyme and sentiment, the singer merges into plaintive appeal, and sings further,—

I: Pore ole boy, long ways from home, : I
Out in dis wide worl' alone.

Suppose he should die! Suppose he has no friends! How he pities himself! Indeed, he is a forlorn being, and his emotions might well be wrought up" (273).

What Odum dismisses as "amusing" and "ridiculous" pathos is, as Louis Wright's lynching suggests, hard social realism about the possible fate that awaited a black wanderer.

12. For the strongest counterargument to the point I make here—the stubborn persistence of the minstrel grin in American popular culture until the mid-1960s—see Boskin.

Works Cited


"Note from Mahara's Minstrels." Indianapolis Freeman 24 Apr. 1897: 5.

"MAKE MY GETAWAY": THE BLUES LIVES OF BLACK MINSTRELS IN HANDY'S FATHER OF THE BLUES


