FOLKWAYS RECORDS AND SERVICE CORPORATION / NYC / USA / FG 3540

# W.C. HANDY BLUES
## Sung by his Daughter
## Katharine Handy Lewis
## in Traditional Style

Memphis Blues
St. Louis Blues
Joe Turner Blues
Chantez Les Bas
Yellow Dog Blues
Loveless Love

**Accompanied by**
**James P. Johnson**
**and Piano Solos**

Notes by Charles E. Smith

Ronald Clyne

M
1630.18
H23
W112
1958

MUSIC LP

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# W. C. HANDY BLUES

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

FOLKWAYS RECORDS Album No. FG 3540
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Dedicated to all who remember. M. A.

NOTE

The release of the hitherto unissued records in this album, along with the preparation of background notes, was planned while W.C. Handy was alive and, as explained in text, was intended as a surprise for him. W.C. Handy was a major figure in American music, the man who brought the blues, fused with elements of ragtime and the minstrels, into popular songs. Since his songs were rhythmically related to early jazz, publication and early popularity of the songs familiarized the public with jazz rhythms and tonal peculiarities long before most of us heard a bona fide jazz band. Except for such extremely rare collector's items as the Bolden cylinder -- which may have been a march, a priceless example of "jazz in brass" -- jazz recording, to all extents and purposes, began with the Victor discs by the Original Dixieland "Jass" Band in 1917. Meanwhile, Memphis Blues had been published in 1912 and St. Louis Blues in 1914. Except for corrections suggested by Mrs. Lewis and incorporated in text early in March, these notes have not been altered. As originally planned, they are a tribute to a composer whose hall of fame is the human heart. The final copy was completed March 22, 1958.

C.E.S.

INTRODUCTION
by
Charles Edward Smith

KATHARINE HANDY LEWIS SINGS HANDY

The discovery of old masters in the record business can be quite as exciting, in its way, as it is in the field of art, especially when the old "masters" are limned in grooves at 33 rpm with the songs of W.C. Handy sung by his daughter Katharine, and with original compositions by one of the great pioneers of jazz piano, James P. Johnson.

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These "works of art" were on glass composition discs such as were used during wartime shortages and, technically, are the "mothers" from which masters are cut. In this instance the original recordings, (which were not lost but were shelved and forgotten by all but the few people directly involved) were transferred to tape and re-recorded by Peter Bartok, a process that did much to eliminate surface noise. But for a decade they were on glass, which is fragile stuff, and the miracle was that they survived at all. In a sense, the ten year time-lag in their release was fortuitous since these records are living history and the jazz public of today is, more than at any other period, historically minded. But these are no mere mementoes of the past. Katharine Lewis, with Jimmy Johnson at the piano, evokes the timeless qualities of the great blues of W.C. Handy.

During the late 1940's, a set of records had been envisioned in terms of presenting Handy's songs in interpretations that would show the gem quality of their structure and that, like precious stones brought into the light, would reveal their many-faceted variety. The planning might have gone on at a leisurely pace but about that time, as will be recalled, the American Federation of Musicians lowered the boom on the recording industry and a halt was called to the making of records until the issues behind the ban were more or less amicably settled. There were, as various albums have testified, many stepped-up recording dates around that time. This set was not so much hurried as it was precipitated at an unfortunate time, though it is doubtful you'd know that if you weren't told. The fact is, Mrs. Lewis' throat had been bothering her, off and on, for days, as it had (we'll come to that) in the past, and she was afraid she might have to contend with a really troublesome vocal apparatus, as she did on the night of Handy's Carnegie Hall concert in 1928.

First of all, no one at the recording studio was quite sure that she would be willing to try. But James P. Johnson, an old friend of hers, was on hand and ready to play the piano, and George Avakian, who helped develop this project because of his respect and admiration for W.C. Handy, phoned her. When he told her, pushing the clincher through in his quiet voice, that one of her favorite accompanists was waiting at the keyboard, she capitulated. There was little time for rehearsal, yet the difference between tests and final records was remarkable, as singer and pianist gradually arrived at the proper mood of interpretation.

And, indeed, the songs of W.C. Handy have seldom, if ever, been sung more adequately than by his daughter Katharine. Other singers have sung them beautifully -- Bessie Smith, who sang in the scalar structure of folk blues, with a deep and moving eloquence, and Ethel Waters, whose interpretations were distinguished by her fine artistry -- but none, it seems, has so successfully achieved the structure intended by the songs' architect. For W.C. Handy brought the blues (along with ragtime and other influences) into written music and thus led the way to a new phase affecting all American music, from songs to symphonies.

The first singer of Handy's songs, oftentimes, was his daughter Katharine, taught the lyrics by her mother and groomed in style by her father. She sings them in this album with freshness, as though their newness in words and music were being unfolded in a premiere of them, and this affords the listener a feeling of nearness and intimacy as though he, too, could recall the house in Memphis, the band rehearsing, and Kitty Handy in pig-tails singing the Memphis Blues. To sing songs of the past and make them part of the present while retaining the flavor of their original melieu is a rare art indeed. In jazz, Turk Murphy is one who is consistently successful at it and when I first heard Katharine Lewis I thought of his uproarious performances of old Bert Williams' specialties though, as you may imagine, their material and styles are quite different. But each begins with an appreciation of the song and its background, and of the lyrics, verse and all. In this last particular there is richness gained as Mrs. Lewis gives us verse and chorus on Yellow Dog Blues, Loveless Love, Joe Turner, Memphis Blues and St. Louis Blues. On the latter she sings only half a chorus the first time through, so as to enable her to go back for the second verse.

Just as Handy found a written formula (1) to convey the folk blues, which are essentially non-notable, dealing with the interstices between tones and the ineffable lag or push in the rhythm -- so Katharine learned to sing in a way that would retain the blues feeling in a new, unique format, "scooping" the melodic line somewhat in the nature of a cadenced style. It is more formal than that of popular music or even of much jazz, yet its very deliberateness seems to emphasize the aliveness of the music, its often joyous rhythm and its closeness to blues and to other music as well, such as ragtime, the minstrels and the tango.

(1) This is discussed by the composer in his autobiography, "Father of the Blues," MacMillan, 1941, one of the important books about the South (and North), and in that historic milestone "Blues: An Anthology," compiled with Abbe Niles in 1926 and re-printed as "A Treasury of the Blues," in 1949 by C. Boni.

Kitty Handy was a chubby little girl who shared the interest of the other Handy children in her father's music, especially when the orchestra rehearsed at home and she was allowed to rehearse along with it. She is a grown woman today, with a son, Homer, Jr., who is in the armed services, and for all the bad turns and blues she has suffered, she conveys a sense of eagerness and alertness. She looks like someone who has known sadness but, for all that, knows how to be happy. It is a rare quality and better than miracle drugs when it comes to keeping young. She has warm brown eyes and they haven't lost the sense of wonder they must have had when -- got up in curls and in a pink silk dress with a pink silk bow in her hair, or dressed all in blue -- she sang at the Memphis Metropolitan Baptist Church, at a combined concert for Fisk, Mahony and Roger Williams Universities, and for so many audiences, in so many places.

"Papa played at Church's Park in Memphis and I used to sing there when I was a little girl. One song was In The Land Where Cotton Is King." She sang this song and The Girl You Never Have Met at a reception for the poet, Edwin Markham, ("Man With A Hoe") at his request -- "Papa played the piano for me and his beautiful cornet." She smiled, "And of course The Memphis Blues. I sang it all around Memphis; at the Country Club I'd often sing it by request. I was ten or eleven then."

You might say she grew up with Handy's songs. When her father composed a new song -- he composed and orchestrated some of his best known works at his home, 659 Jeannett Street -- he would bring it into the parlor and when he'd got comfortably settled, would say, "Katharine, come and sing this." Thus, Mrs. Handy and the children were first to hear the songs that later became world-famous. "One of my favorites," Mrs. Lewis confided, "was Shoeboot's Serenade." It was subtitled "Rag Song With Trombone Obligato" and, like most of Handy's tunes, was featured in minstrels. This little musical prank put Schubert "in the Alley" -- which is a New York pun in ragtime slang.

When business was booming, Handy had several groups working at one time and often rehearsals were held at Handy's home. This is how it happened she got her band training so early. Sometimes her father would express surprise that she knew the lyrics so well but the reason was simple, she had been taught to memorize them, apart from the music. "Mother would teach me the lyrics," she explained, "and have me recite them to see if I knew what they meant and to judge my diction." (That penultimate qualification was a tall order for a little girl but the intimacy and sincere warmth of George A. Norton's lyrics for Memphis Blues went straight to her heart and the mysteries to unravel on Yellow Dog proved fascinating.)

When the family moved to New York, Katharine sang at Abyssinian Baptist Church and at St. Marks' African Methodist Episcopal Church, among others. She'd always had a fondness for hymns, as had her father, the son of a preacher. On the secular side, she sang at the old Lafayette Theatre, which was to blues and jazz what the Palace was to vaudeville.

One of Katharine's early away-from-home concerts was in Atlanta, where Harry H. Pace, Handy's partner, had booked their troupe into the colored auditorium. But there were so many white Atlanta citizens who wanted to share the musical experience, that Pace was encouraged to book them into the auditorium where the Metropolitan Opera gave its performances. There were to be accomodations for Negroes as well. Like a good advance promotion man, Pace parlayed some stomping and fuming on the part of the Atlanta Constitution (which, despite this old tantrum, is one of the best newspapers in the country) into a publicity build-up. This unexpected fame, not to say notoriety, left it up to Handy to produce the goods. "We needed a powerful attraction to conquer Atlanta," he wrote, but it reads as though he was saying it aloud, with a slightly solemn expression and the hint of a smile on his benign face. To strengthen the company they added Clarence Williams and Armand J. Piron from New Orleans. Clarence still plays piano in jazz at times; he is one of the few authentic Basin Street "professors" still active in music.

In "Father of the Blues" Handy gives a graphic account of that occasion, which was also a very big occasion for his young daughter: "An awe fell upon us as we took our places on the stage where Caruso had sung with the Metropolitan Opera Company. We faced the curtain like a flock of dusky Daniels come to judgement before an audience of seven thousand. Then the barrier went up. Before us a sea of faces rose and a silence that was oppressive. A moment later the band struck up Hail To the Spirit of Freedom, a march which I wrote for the Lincoln Jubilee Exposition held at the coliseum in Chicago. No one objected to that, so we followed it up with Semiramis, a classical overture which the boys played in conventional style. The audience gave us a good hand. Then the storm broke when we played the Memphis Blues and had to repeat it nine times. After that it was goodbye to the printed program. We played only requests, and these called for blues, blues and more blues. My daughter Katharine, then only twelve, sang the St. Louis Blues and, for encores, Joe Turner and again Memphis Blues..."

Katharine Handy sometimes thought -- being a young girl, with ambitions -- that in the home she was over-protected. She'd have liked to try her luck in the rough tough places where the rhythm belters battled their way to the front as singers but these places, Prohibition hang-outs, were almost always gangster-owned or gangster-controlled -- even to the swank Cotton Club in Harlem, the largest piece of which was said to be held by the Owney "Beer Baron" Madden mob. That her father didn't want her to work in such an environment is not difficult to understand. That she had her share of frustrations as a teen-ager and as a young woman is equally understandable, once one has heard her story.

In the 1920's the composer, J. Rosamond Johnson, offered to give Katharine voice lessons. However, these had to be deferred because of throat trouble aggravated by two weeks of inclement weather. It was during this wet spell that Handy's 1928 Carnegie Hall concert was put on, with the help of Robert Clairmont. (Incidentally, one of the numbers played by the orchestra conducted by Mr. Handy was William Grant Still's arrangement of James P. Johnson's Yamekraw.) On the night of the concert Katharine's throat was raw, her voice on the edge of hoarseness. Her mother beat up a mixture of lemon juice, sugar and whites of eggs, gave it to her at intervals and brought some along to the dressing room. At that history-making concert she sang some of the songs in this set, including Memphis and St. Louis Blues and none in the audience (including the writer of this article) knew that her throat was on fire.

She never did get to those lessons with J. Rosamond Johnson. Instead, composer J. Bernie Barbour saw that she got to a throat clinic. For a long time after that, she had to avoid all high notes. After two years had passed she was allowed to work more vigorously in the low register so that she was able to develop her voice around the alto range. Bessie Clay Kuzdo, a voice teacher from Alabama, coached her in resonance so that gradually she was able to make good use of what -- on the face of it -- seemed limited facilities. Listening to this album, possibly an expert on the lore of the larynx could detect that she was working with an instrument that had taken its share of punishment in previous years. I certainly could not. Where the subject seems to call for an exquisite poignance of tone and a vibrato shimmering like a heat wave, as on Loveless Love, she sings that way, and where it calls for volume, an expanse of tone, with song surging from the throat, as on St. Louis Blues, she not

only makes it but seems to have power in reserve (like so many good singers do). And in all of this, the rapprochement of voice and piano is wonderful to listen to -- and though Jimmy is now playing a Steinway in the sky, on this record he will help introduce to many new listeners the voice of Katharine Handy Lewis.

Katharine worked on many radio programs, including some of the earliest programs of Handy's blues on the air, and with Clarence Williams, who put Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet on radio in 1924, she did dramatic sketches on NBC, spoofing opera. "We sort of jazzed it up a bit," she explained.

P. G. Lowery, a cornet virtuoso Handy met in his minstrel days (W.C. was with Mahara's Minstrels) once wrote in The Freeman, "W.C. Handy's street work is smooth, his triple-tonguing is brilliant, and he certainly plays a song to suit me." This talent came in good stead in New York, when Handy led a family group on WABC and on WOR where the cast included Katharine, who sang and often accompanied herself on piano, W.C., Jr., xylophone, Lucile, piano.

"I worked with Fats Waller on the radio program 'Paramount on Parade,'" Mrs. Lewis recalled. "That was backstage at the Paramount. I sang my father's blues and Fats played the organ." Of singing for radio in the 1920's and early 1930's she said, "If I couldn't get Fats -- if I couldn't get Jimmy Johnson -- if I couldn't get Fred Bryant or Russell Smith -- I could always call upon Ethel Waters' pianist, the late Pearl Wright, who told me that it was with deep respect that Ethel Waters allowed her to accompany me -- an honor she'd never allow anyone else."

She was the first girl to sing with Noble Sissle's Orchestra and she worked in a vocal group with songwriter Harold Arlen, taking alto parts. And she worked often and happily with the late and great "harmful little armful", Thomas "Fats" Waller, the heavy-set pianist with the airy touch and the superb rhythm. It was at the Roosevelt Theatre in Harlem that Katharine first heard the greatest jazz organist of them all, and got to meet him. "He was the attraction there," she said, "and people would stand in line for blocks to get inside to hear and see him -- me, too!" Bud Gray helped to get Katharine and Fats on radio shows and also arranged for her to sing at Brooklyn Paramount. On one occasion, Fats let her down with a thud. This was on June 18, 1931, when they were to perform over WABC. Fats didn't even show up at rehearsal. He'd got lost socializing. He got to playing piano the day before at a party and, she later learned, was still playing it the day of the program, and completely forgot the engagement. (She sent for orchestrations, the Freddie Rich Orchestra handled them with dispatch and -- the show went on.)

Fats was often thoughtless and forgetful, though never maliciously so. When a special Fats Waller concert was given at Carnegie Hall, Fats forgot to invite the man he had often and enthusiastically hailed as his teacher, James P. Johnson! Jimmy understood what had happened, of course -- he knew Fats from way back, when Fats was a teen-age kid eager to learn -- but his feelings were hurt and though he tried to pass it off as an amusing anecdote, his chuckle was choked off. It still hurt, long after.

As a composer, Katharine Handy Lewis has written My Blues Chant and other numbers. As a woman with a career she is Secretary to Handy Brothers Music Co., Inc., the substantial firm that began with Pace & Handy and almost failed during the 1920's, at the time Handy was having to make an adjustment to a personal crisis, the gradual loss of his sight.(2)

In the competitive world of popular songs a couple of decades back, Katharine Handy was once or twice unfairly tagged as a plugger for her father's catalog. It is true that she sang his songs, both because she liked them and because there were always requests for them. But never as a song plugger. She sang them because she had grown in them and they in her. No singer could have been more closely identified with songs than Katharine Handy Lewis with the blues of W.C. Handy. This has given her an acute awareness of their worth. Of Memphis Blues she commented, "This is an historical document in music." And she added, "He makes history as he writes."

(2) Though he lost his sight, he remained very active, as anyone who knows him can testify. Once when I was advisor on popular music and jazz for OWI, and script editor of its Music Section, I did a script for the Army's "G.I. Jive" shortwave program, featuring Handy. (The material is in the Library of Congress.) Langston Hughes helped Mr. Handy rehearse the script and when he came to the studio he not only "read" the lines with sponteneity, he also played a nostalgic chorus of St. Louis Blues on cornet, which director Nick Ray taped in for a sign-off on that particular show.

## THE BLUES IN SONGS AND PIANO SOLOS

"I never will forget the tune Handy called The Memphis Blues..." - Memphis Blues

### CHANTEZ LES BAS (c) 1931

Of the songs of W.C. Handy, only one is included that does not relate directly and forcefully to the blues. And this one, Chantez Les Bas, which Katharine first sang when it was written in 1931, was inspired by Creole songs. The most modern of the group, this song, paradoxically, has a slightly archaic quality as well as a blues shading. It reminds me in mood of a fragment of song, a kind of lullaby, I heard in a Creole section near the French Quarter in New Orleans, and of a woman with a bright kerchief on her dark hair, selling pralines with a chant such as only a Creole could devise. And the product -- to carry the analogy a bit further -- had the qualities of this song, the solid bite and flavor (pecan and brown sugar) and a liquid sweetness melting on the tongue.

### MEMPHIS BLUES (c) 1912, 1913, 1940

"With Sophie Tucker as one of its first promoters," wrote Sigmund Spaeth in "A History of Popular Music In America" (Random House, 1948) "the St. Louis Blues became in time the most recorded and arranged composition in the entire literature of music." This is indeed a formidable achievement. But though it remains the most famous of all Handy's songs, and the symbol, to people the world over, of the relationship of blues to American music and the world's music, it is Memphis Blues that furnishes the overture, so to speak, -- the best possible introduction to the songs of Handy, especially as James P. Johnson in this interpretation strikes chords that evoke ragtime, the blues and a touch of the tango and Katharine Handy Lewis contributes the cadence of song, as well as a kind of minstrel-vaudeville flavor that modern singers often leave out, perhaps for fear of being tagged old fashioned. Her singing has dignity, born of the fierce pride with which she sang these songs when they were written.

The "bad bargain" -- which is how Handy describes the deal he got on Memphis Blues -- is an almost classic illustration of the fruits of prejudice and perfidity. I could sympathize with Mr. Handy's impoverished days in St. Louis, and those nights on the cobblestones down by the levee that inspired him to embody in music

I hate to see de evenin' sun go down...

but the kind of deal the composer got on the rights to Memphis Blues still sends chills down the spine. But that is in the past. Beginning in 1940, Handy once more controlled the copyright of this song, and the song itself is one of the great musical stories of our time, which thaws out the spirit. Not only is the song itself history, as Katharine Lewis said, -- the story behind it is also fascinating.

In the band business in Memphis W.C. Handy had as many as four or five groups working at one time. On the Beale Street side of town, when they thought of music, they thought of Handy. Thus, his group was recruited (1) to help put over the campaign for the local political boss, E.H. Crump, who was running on a "reform" platform and (2) on at least one occasion, to do a job for the opposition! The amazing thing about Handy's campaign song is that it was essentially political satire, yet it probably helped to sweep in the Crump forces (as planned) which were, anyway, not all that serious about reform. A typical verse ended:

"We don't care what Mr. Crump don't 'low
We gon' to bar'l-house anyhow--
Mr. Crump can go and catch himself some air!"

In due time this 1909 song, based on a blues motif, became, in the creative work of W.C. Handy, The Memphis Blues. But Mr. Crump wasn't out of business. Not by a long shot. Folksingers took it over and two decades later a folk blues-breakdown record came out titled simply Mr. Crump. I've long since lost the record but, making allowances for a faulty memory, a typical verse would conclude something like this:

"Oh the Methodist women got up and 'gin to shout,
Oh the Methodist women they got up and they
'gin to shout,
Oh the Methodist women got up an' 'gin to shout,
'Don' you know darn well that-a whiskey's voted
out?
If Mr. Crump don' like it, aint gonna have it
here!'"

The fact that Memphis Blues is the first published blues, at least of any consequence, is less important historically than the fact that Handy was the first to adapt the blues form successfully to written music. This was a great and lasting contribution. George A. Norton's lyrics for the 1913 edition helped to give this period piece lasting value. And of course the music clinches it -- this is music for yesterday, today and tomorrow. It combines certain features of ragtime, especially in the verse, and this was also a faithful historical picture of what was happening. *

* After the above was written but before it was sent to the printer, the April 3, 1958 Down Beat carried an interview with W.C. Handy. In view of what I had written about Memphis Blues, I was gratified to learn that this was his favorite. He referred to the craftsmanship of this song and to its hard-luck lot in life in these words: "I still feel it has more musicianship in it than St. Louis Blues. I feel about Memphis Blues like a mother toward a wayward son."

### JOE TURNER (c) 1915

According to Handy, the prototype of Joe Turner in the blues sung around Memphis, was Joe Turney, a brother of Pete Turney who was governor of Tennessee from 1892 to 1896. He was a particularly tough sheriff whose job it was to take prisoners from Memphis to the Nashville penitentiary. However, Mr. Handy used the material to inspire a song based on blues, about a woman whose man left her. This is a legitimate procedure both in folk and in written music. As I pointed out in notes for Big Bill Broonzy (FA 2326 and FG 3586) the Joe Turner that Big Bill sings about is the opposite of Joe Turney -- a sort of symbolic white man--black man who went around doing good deeds! It is more than likely that the song that Big Bill heard, and that was sung in 1892, and the song that influenced Mr. Handy, were related. "You heard it all over the South," Handy wrote of the melody for the folk blues about Joe Turner, "but wherever it was sung, the words dealt with a local situation."

### YELLOW DOG BLUES (c) 1914

First titled Yellow Dog Rag, Yellow Dog Blues was W.C.'s answer to Shelton Brooks' I Wonder Where My Easy Rider's Gone. Somewhere in the background of both songs were versions of C.C. Rider such as one Ma Rainey sang, called See See Rider (reissued on Riverside) and the wonderful story-telling one by Big Bill in Folkways FG 3586 which, as he said, dated back before his time. To be sure, both of these records were made years after Shelton Brooks' song, and Handy's, but from folk sources that had kept alive the original blues. (Musical interrelationships do not necessarily follow a chronological pattern, as the history of Mr. Crump shows.) Yellow Dog Blues became a song-hit, especially during the 1920's, and has again, in the 1950's, enjoyed a revival. Katharine Handy Lewis gives it an exuberant performance. It is delightful, even to the slangy spoken interpolation. From the sounds of things, one may conclude that she and Jimmy enjoyed every moment of it.

Here are a few lines from Yellow Dog, followed by an explanation of them:

"Easy Rider struck this burg today
On a southboun' rattler side-door Pullman car;
Seen him here an' he was on the hog.
Easy Rider's got-a stay away
So he had to vamp it but the hike aint far.
He's gone where the Southern cross the Yellow Dog."

Yellow Dog Blues (c. 1914, 1952, W.C. Handy. Pub. Handy Brothers Music Co., Inc., 1650 Broadway, NYC.)

This reports that the good-time lover of a good-time girl has moved on to another town, that he travelled on a south-bound freight, that he was broke ("on the hog") and that, having had reasons for getting out of town, he'd "vamped it" to the place where the Southern (Railroad) crosses the Yellow Dog (Yazoo Delta Railroad). Handy, in Moorehead, Mississippi, the town referred to, heard some folk verses sung to weird guitar chords -- and recognized this as the locale -- where the east and westbound met and crossed the north and southbound trains four times a day. Said Handy, "This fellow was going where the Southern cross the Dog, and he didn't care who knew it."

LOVELESS LOVE (c) 1921

Both W.C. Handy and James P. Johnson have written tunes based on the old folksong, Careless Love, one of the oldest identifiable tunes that is clearly both Afr American and Anglo-American in ancestry. Handy's is the familiar Loveless Love, James P.'s, which he arrived at by manipulating the harmonic background, is Old Fashioned Love. Handy first played Careless Love in Bessemer, Alabama, in 1892, so he must have heard it well before then. It used to be played on guitar and sung by one of the girls at Lulu White's fabulous Mahogany Hall on Basin Street, not for the paying guests but for the girls, and they'd sometimes get to crying when she sang the lyrics about a careless girl and her careless love.

With this performance by Katharine Handy Lewis, there will have been at least two outstanding recordings of Loveless Love, the other having been made by Jack Teagarden in the early 1930's. On Loveless Love Mrs. Lewis sings with a plaintive tonal quality and the loveliness of her voice re-creates the loveliness of the lyrics, verse and chorus. Formal training did not rob her of a peculiarly personal vibrato.

In Loveless Love, as in other of his songs, Handy utilizes the blues format oftentimes in constructing the lyric of the verse section, thus setting his theme, which he enlarges to the dimensions of song. There is a transition, a flow, from verse to chorus, and in order to really appreciate the latter it is necessary to hear the entire lyric, as one does in these performances. The development of the soaring melody of the chorus is handled beautifully, not only by the singer but by Jimmy's piano, with chords mounting in the treble. This is very beautiful piano and especially enjoyable in conjunction with the lyric that

from Love is like a hydrant, it turns off and on...

to Milkless milk, and silkless silk

weaves its structure of song.

ST. LOUIS BLUES (c) 1914

"Help me to Cairo,
Make St. Louis by myself..." - St. Louis Blues

In the spring of 1958 a moving picture, based on the life of W.C. Handy, opened in several major American cities, including St. Louis, Missouri. Few in the audience could envisage the city as it was in the last century when Handy found a place to sleep on the cobblestones down by the Mississippi, an experience, he has always said, that helped him to write St. Louis Blues. The ragtime pianos were tinkling, then, and Tom Turpin, the 300-pound composer, diamonds for buttons on his silk shirt, open at the throat, wearing an expensive Stetson hat, played the piano or presided over the dice table, whatever the traffic called for. He was "The Metronome" and Scott Joplin, perhaps the greatest ragtime composer of them all, was "The Diminished Fifth Man". But today's movie-goers never knew the wine rooms with their potted palms, the bar pictures over the polished glasses, the call buttons to houses along Market and the upright piano. To be sure, Handy himself saw little enough of this, being "on the hog," but he took in what he could and, after all, who has a better idea of candy, the kid who gorges or the kid with his nose stuck up against the store window? "I have tried to forget that first sojourn in St. Louis," he wrote ("Father of the Blues") "but I don't think I'd want to forget the high-roller Stetson hats of the men or the diamonds the girls wore in their ears."

In 1929 RCA Photophone produced a two-reel short titled "St. Louis Blues". Bessie Smith was featured and, with James P. at the piano, sang her magnificent version of the 1914 song. In a picture of 1938 Dorothy Lamour went down the road to St. Louis, minus her famous playmates, Bob and Bing. When the Duke of Windsor was king he had more pipers than old King Cole had fiddlers, nine to be exact, and on one occasion at Balmoral Castle, had them all wailing on St. Louis Blues. A line from the lyric gave William Faulkner a short story title. As for the music, it has been presented in every conceivable style, and in almost every country of the globe. In this album it is presented by the singer who, as a little girl with a pink bow in her hair, helped to present it to the world. And this performance is, in a sense, a present to W.C. Handy, from his daughter Katharine and from one of the great pianists of jazz. It is a joint effort, not merely a solo with accompaniment, and in its performance, singer and pianist inspire each other. As on many of these songs, there is some wonderful piano. There is anguish and hope in the resonance of her voice as she sings the folk-inspired lines,

Help me to Cairo

Make St. Louis by myself.

There was a touch of tango rhythm in Memphis Blues but this rhythm, thought to be originally of African derivation, was most forcefully employed in St. Louis Blues. In the writing of it, Handy got ideas from blues, a preacher's exhortation, the call for a square dance and a tango rhythm -- and from this diversity created a coherent, unified composition. It is more complex than the outwardly simple structure of the 12-bar folk blues, yet it retains features of the best blues, directness of statement and a rendering of that ineffable tonality that make the blues one of the significant art forms of our time, as well as an incalculable force in the creation of jazz style and timbre. The final strain, previously employed by Handy in Jogo Blues (1913), was inspired by the "Come Along" chant of Elder Lazarus Gardner, sung while he took up the collection at African Methodist Episcopal Church in Florence, Alabama. And he put St. Louis Blues in the key of G, explaining, "It was the memory of that odd gent who called figures for the Kentucky breakdown -- the one who everlastingly pitched his tones in the key of G and moaned the calls like an Elder preaching at a revival meeting."

The lyric is a masterpiece of blues usage in song.

BLUE MOODS

To complement the set of Handy's songs, sung by Katharine Handy Lewis, there is included on this record a set of three improvisations on a blues theme by James P. Johnson. The composer called them Blue Moods and further identified the third section as Blue Moods, Sex. Whether he intended these to be three sections of one work or only two, will have to remain a mystery. The first two differ in mood but are close in pattern. The third section, also close in pattern, was clearly designated by James P. as separate.

At this point a pianist of Jimmy's calibre could have gone on in one of two directions -- he could accept the second, cut two, as a variant of his original improvisation, or he could assume that he had created a different mood, and develop it further on another go-round. But there wasn't to be another. I think we'll have to call this second section unfinished business. Not that it's technically at fault -- it's beautifully played -- but he did not have time to develop it as fully as his knowledge and creative gift might have permitted. What we have, therefore, is essentially one theme, approached in three different moods, the first two only slightly dissimilar. The parallel between parts is, however, the only indication of an un-resolved concept. Taken as individual improvisations -- which is how they were "composed," by the way -- these are brilliant brief tone poems of the blues-jazz-ragtime genre, especially the first and third cuts, and in the richness of playing and feeling have a magnificent maturity.

James P. Johnson had strong ideas about how a tune should be played, and set himself high standards. Also basic to his approach was his insistence on the thematic, tonal, melodic and rhythmic relationships of the tune being played, which he achieved with a sureness of definition in both the phrasing and in keyboard technique, with an effortless rhythm, when he was going good, and a strong tempo -- and at any time, in any piece, that jolt out of the blue, the jazzman's prerogative, the unpredictable!

Jimmy's awareness of compositional relationships is evident in various of his concert works, such as the piano concerto that was given its premiere by the Brooklyn Symphony Orchestra, with the composer at the piano. Apropos of this, in a forthcoming Folkways album of unissued piano solos by James P., there is included an improvisation on Memphis Blues that should entice anyone who hears -- in this set -- the strong and exuberant introduction he plays for Mrs. Lewis.

Blue Moods is appropriate to this album for many reasons, not the least of which is that its background is rich in the sources that W.C. Handy drew upon for inspiration -- the blues, ragtime, and that nostalgic piano music of the "professors" of a bygone era. Elsewhere I have written that, to some extent, James P. anticipated Earl Hines' remarkable facility for seeming to depart from the beat without actually ever losing track of it. In Blue Moods, this facility is in evidence. There are also passages of "stride piano" -- the style which he pioneered. Jimmy could barrelhouse with the best of them but this piece, displaying his versatile technique, is notable for clarity of style. The structure is wonderfully solid, especially on cuts one and three, with every note in place, every note meaningful.

When James P. was feeling good he had that piano in hand, and it did what he told it to do. As you listen to the good left hand of Jimmy Johnson, remember that he'd already suffered strokes and had -- almost by sheer force of will -- got the horses back where they belonged. Only a few years before, sitting at a grand piano in his home, he tried out the hand and looked at it as though it was a stranger. It just wasn't behaving like James P. Johnson's left hand! Then (for an all too brief period) he had a respite from illness and during that time, the left hand came down on the keys, powerful, sensitive, sure -- with plenty of horses!

During his lifetime Jimmy worked with most of the great female vocalists of blues, jazz and Negro show music, including Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters. (In Columbia's "The Bessie Smith Story" you'll find St. Louis Blues and Yellow Dog Blues, though not with James P., but he does appear in this series, most memorably to furnish the beautiful accompaniment for Backwater Blues.) His enthusiasm for music made it a joy to work with him, though with a singer, as with himself, he set high standards. His background extends all the way from the blues, ragtime and cakewalk contests of San Juan Hill (a New York City neighborhood; Thelonious Monk, an admirer of Jimmy's and a talented composer-pianist, lives there) to revues, and, ultimately, concert music. All of which made it a certainty that he would provide appropriate accompaniments for Handy's songs, particularly since he was particularly fond of this composer's works. And, as remarked earlier, he'd often played piano for Katharine Handy Lewis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

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"Big Bill Broonzy - Country Blues" (FA 2326)

"Big Bill Broonzy - His Story" (FG 3586)

"Blues by Brownie McGhee" (FA 2030)

"Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry Sing" (FA 2327)

"Ohio Valley Ballads" (FA 2025)

"900 Miles" (Railroad Songs) (FA 2013)

"Jazz - The South" (FJ 2801)

"Heritage U.S.A. vol. 2" (Documentary) (FH 2192)

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