Handy, W.C.,

Handy, W.C., in full WILLIAM CHRISTOPHER HANDY (b. Nov. 16, 1873, Florence, Ala., U.S.--d. March 28, 1958, New York, N.Y.), black American composer who changed the course of popular music by integrating the blues idiom into the then-fashionable ragtime. Among his best-known works is the classic "St. Louis Blues."

A son and grandson of ministers, Handy was educated at Teachers Agricultural and Mechanical College, Huntsville, Ala., and worked as a schoolteacher and bandmaster. He conducted his own orchestra from 1903 to 1921.

Handy worked during the period of transition from ragtime to jazz. Drawing on the vocal blues melodies of Negro folklore, he added harmonizations in his orchestral arrangements. His work helped develop the conception of the blues as a harmonic framework within which to improvise. With his "Memphis Blues" (1911) and especially his "St. Louis Blues" (1914), he introduced a nostalgic element peculiar to the music of Southern blacks. This was achieved chiefly by use of the "blue" or slightly flattened seventh tone of the scale, which was characteristic of black folk music. Later he wrote other blues pieces ("Beale Street Blues," "Careless Love") and several marches and symphonic compositions. Forced to publish "St. Louis Blues" himself, he organized a publishing firm, which he directed until late in his life. He issued anthologies of Negro spirituals and blues and studies of black American musicians. His autobiography, Father of the Blues, was published in 1941.