Although “St. Louis Blues” is regarded as a milestone of 20th-century American music, the best-known composition of William Christopher Handy (lauded as “Father of the Blues”), the song was far from an immediate success. In this it can be said to reflect the career of W.C. Handy himself, who was already 40 by the time he wrote “St. Louis Blues,” in 1914, and whose first success, “The Memphis Blues,” had only come two years earlier. “The Memphis Blues” had brought Handy both satisfaction and regret: never imagining it would become such a hit, he had sold his rights to the song for a one-time fee. Determined not to let this happen again, the composer teamed with a young lyricist and bank teller to establish, in Memphis, the Pace & Handy Music Company--at a time when few African American songwriters had entered the publishing field.

Hoping, as Handy later wrote, “for a success to compensate” for the loss of “The Memphis Blues,” he removed himself from the distraction of “four lively and robust youngsters at home” to spend an evening on Beale Street in the heart of the African American community. In his memoir, Handy vividly described a neighborhood that (notwithstanding more recent efforts to popularize it as a tourist spot) was largely wiped out by the urban renewal of the 1960s and ‘70s:

Chitterling joints were as crowded as the more fashionable resorts like the Iroquois. Piano thumpers tickled the ivories in the saloons to attract customers, furnishing a theme for the prayers at Beale Street Baptist Church… Pimps in boxback coats and undented Stetsons came out to get a breath of early evening air and to welcome the young night.
Within this environment, pulling an all-nighter in a rented room, Handy created the work that was to seal his reputation. Lyrically, “St. Louis Blues” reflected not only Handy’s poetic gifts but his empathy as an observer. He would recall how the line “my man’s got a heart like a rock cast in the sea,” was inspired by a woman he once encountered in St. Louis, “stumbling along the poorly lighted street.” Hungry and poor at the time, Handy had been moved by the observation that the woman’s pain “seemed even greater.” As a musical composition, “St. Louis Blues” opened with the standard 12-bar blues format and then, in the bridge section, shifted to a tango rhythm that biographer David Robertson traces to Handy’s experience in Havana as a performer in 1900. With his genius for combining diverse musical influences, Handy established himself as one of the original genre-mixers.

While Handy was “secretly” pleased with his new song and “could scarcely wait for the public verdict,” very little happened at first. Eventually Handy arranged for Charles Anderson, a performer known for his skill in what would then have been described as “realistic” portrayals of women, to have exclusive rights to “St. Louis Blues” for a set period of time (it should be noted that, in the first decades of the 20th century, female impersonation was still a common, and even respected, artistic form on American stages). In this way, “St. Louis Blues” was able to grow in popularity as it traveled with Anderson from city to city--a common way “hits” were generated in the years before radio. White vaudevillian Al Bernard made the first commercially successful recording of “St. Louis Blues” in 1919, but it was not until the following year, when another white singer, Marion Harris, issued her version on Columbia, that the song fully came into its own as what biographer Robertson described as a “haunting, erotic lament.” Avoiding the stereotypical use of dialect, Harris delivered a rendition of intelligence and feeling.

By the time Handy got around to recording his own version of “St. Louis Blues,” his life and career had taken a downward turn. Suffering from neuralgia (the result of an infected tooth), periods of blindness and overall poor health, he was additionally beset by debts and other financial troubles. Later in the year he would even be forced to sell many of his copyrights, including “St. Louis Blues,” to a friend for a bargain price, with the understanding that they could be repurchased later. It may have been with the hope of reviving his fortunes that the composer entered Paramount’s New York studio in January of 1922, with an aggregation he billed as “Handy’s Memphis Blues Band.” This marked only the second time that Handy himself had recorded. The first had been in 1917, and Handy’s interesting description of that event can also be applied to the 1922 session (given that both occurred in the years before microphones allowed for a fuller, more complex reproduction of sound):

> Our clarinetist sat in a corner on a six-foot stool and played into a megaphone near the ceiling… The three violinists stood directly in front of the recording apparatus and played into megaphones there. The saxophonists were seated on the side and played into their own megaphones… But the poor drummer was a dead goose where the record was concerned. While they played as hard as ever in life, the drums and basses could not be recorded in those days.

The Handy’s Memphis Blues Band “St. Louis Blues” is an instrumental that differs from other versions by opening with the bridge section. It features a rapid-fire intro by Handy himself on cornet--an instrument he had mastered as a schoolboy, practicing finger runs unobtrusively at his
desk. Supported by a combo of woodwinds, cello, and trombone, Handy then moves into the first verse (what would correspond, in a vocal version, to “I hate to see the evening sun go down”). String instruments push forward rhythmically as clarinets wail in the background. Then, a return to the bridge: only this time, Handy incorporates “breaks” that fill with swooping reed instruments and billowy horns. The recording continues with alternating verse and bridge sections, each colored by masterful variations, until wrapping up with a different Handy composition, “Ole Miss Blues.” Taken as a whole, the Memphis Blues Band’s “St. Louis Blues” is a stirring reminder of Handy’s performative brilliance and an invaluable chance to hear him interpret his own most famous composition.

David Freeland is the author of the books “Automats, Taxi Dances and Vaudeville”; “American Hotel,” and “Ladies of Soul.”

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.