



# "JOHN HENRY BLUES"

*Gordon James Currie*

BY

W. C. HANDY

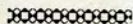
Writer of

"MEMPHIS BLUES"

"ST. LOUIS BLUES"

"HARLEM BLUES" Etc.

"JOHN HENRY BLUES" A true story from  
Negro Life the melody of which has been sung  
by laborers in the south since the Civil War.

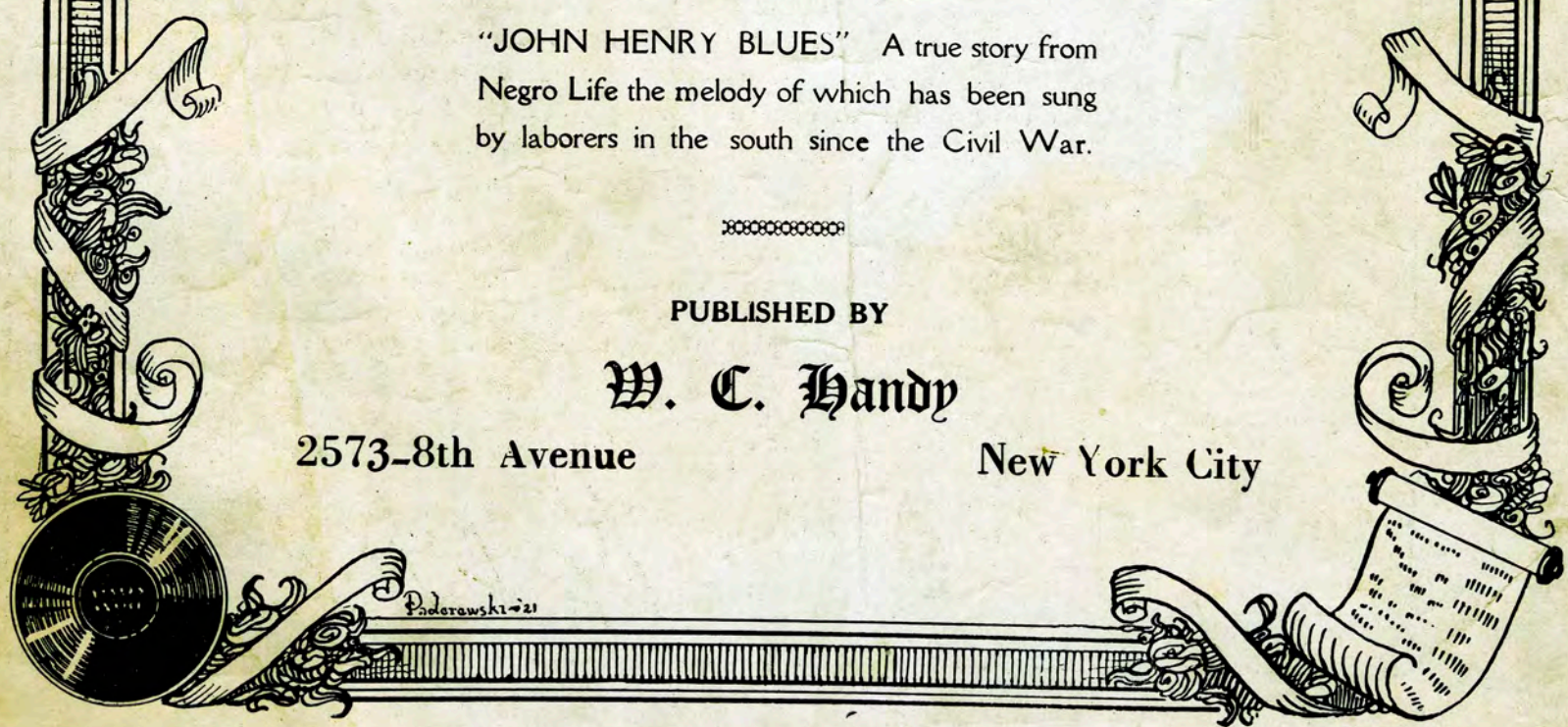


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*Poderawski 21*

## PREFACE

To the Citizens of Florence, Alabama, my birth place, and the residents of Muscle Shoals district, I dedicate my humble effort herein.

To them I owe the inspiration for "JOHN HENRY BLUES;" and to Mr. Phil H. Brown, I am indebted for the true story, as given with his signature below.— THE AUTHOR

### The Tragedy of John Henry

It would be vain to attempt to estimate the singular service to Negro folklore that Mr. Handy has contributed in preserving the legend of John Henry. This character is the patron saint of the colored section hands and quarrymen everywhere. Whether mythical or real, his fame is secure, and it is seldom that a hand-drill is driven or a rivet struck in the Southland unless tuneful tribute is paid to his memory.

John Henry, so the legend runs, was the king of the riveters and drillers. "Black but comely," he possessed a physical contour that would bring joy to the heart of a sculptor. He could do more work than any four ordinary men, consume prodigious quantities of grog and was the center of a myriad of maidenly sighs from the hearts of dusky belles. He was Grand Mentor of the lodge, official umpire at the baseball games and the Supreme Court and last word in all community disputes. It was thus he reigned for many years with due dignity and decorum, seemingly unconscious of his power, yet with his royalty unquestioned and unsullied.

Like other dynasties whose tenure is not zealously guarded, John Henry's throne of physical prowess tottered. When one morning a usurper appeared in the form of a pneumatic punch and riveter. The new invention was installed with the guarantee to perform the work of ten men. John's heart became heavy beneath the dense clouds of gloomy foreboding. He felt his throne sinking beneath him and foresaw the passing of his fame.

Then, as falling monarchs usually do, he evinced the human side and resolved to make one last stand against the mechanical pretender for his dynasty. His powerful, elastic muscles, potent in all previous emergencies, would serve him in this crisis and he would yet show his subjects that he was supreme. He issued a ukase that he, "John Henry, King of All Drillers and Riveters and Defender of the Faith in Physical Strength, would drive more rivets than any machine made by the hand of man." Over a brimming glass of sparkling beverage, long since extinct by the ruthless hand of Volstead, he placed a generous wager as an earnest of his confidence.

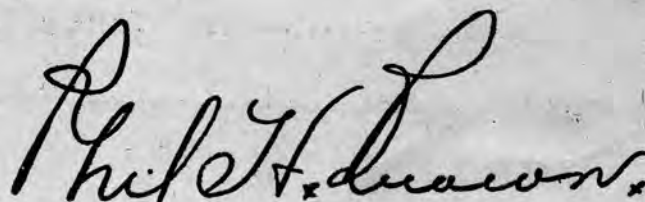
All the world loves a fighter and his votaries rallied to him and bets were freely made upon the result of this peculiar contest.

In the finale of this tragedy, tradition comes to the parting of the ways. One version, the one which Mr. Handy has epitomized and painted in "blue," has it that on the day of the vital test, John Henry's hammer fell in tripper blows to the song he sang; while the mechanical riveter hit a "tap-tap-tap" from the compressed air behind it, and it was truly "Taps," the funeral dirge of the dethroned John Henry: that our hero, feeling all was lost and his fame departing, gathered his energies for a last stand, strained his muscles for one supreme effort, with his hammer suspended, and then fell dead beneath it.

Another and more romantic version is still given in the legends and songs of the quarries and among the section hands is that John Henry met and acknowledged defeat at the hands of the new mechanism, and with bowed head "faded away"—passed out from the haunts of his erstwhile glory and was never seen nor heard again. Conformed to this belief you may hear even to this day down in the South, where steel clashes against steel in railroad construction and the drill seeks to pierce the heart of stone, the departed King's rhythmic requiem:

"John Henry" had a yallah gal;  
De dress she wo' wus blue.  
Down de railroad track  
Swo' he'd nevah come back--  
John Henry, I'll be true!  
John Henry, I'll be true!

Washington, D. C.



# John Henry Blues

W. C. HANDY

Piano introduction in E-flat major, 2/4 time. The right hand features a melodic line with grace notes and slurs, while the left hand provides a steady bass accompaniment with eighth notes.

Voice

Vocal line: In Al - a - bam' at  
 Piano accompaniment continues with a consistent eighth-note bass line and chords in the right hand.

Vocal line: Mus-cles Shoals Dam I saw the great John Hen - - ry — A  
 Piano accompaniment continues with a consistent eighth-note bass line and chords in the right hand.

Vocal line: dusk - y hu - man bat-ter-ing ram — With mus-cles large and  
 Piano accompaniment continues with a consistent eighth-note bass line and chords in the right hand.

sin-ew - y— He had a worlds rec-ord just for riv-et - ing steel of course this

rep - u - ta - tion thrilled him— He bet he'd drive more riv - ets than a

com-pressed air drill Al-though he won the ef - fort killed him— I've heard their

ham - mers ring and col-ored work-man sing From Tex - as to Vir - gin-ia.—

Dis ole ham - mer \_\_\_\_\_ killed - John Hen - - ry \_\_\_\_\_ Made mus-ic  
 dam in \_\_\_\_\_ all cre - a - - tion \_\_\_\_\_ Was be  
 Ford has \_\_\_\_\_ mil-lions and tril - - lions \_\_\_\_\_ Fo' Mus-cles

sweet \_\_\_\_\_ and it did a muse Dis lit-tle song made \_\_\_\_\_  
 gun \_\_\_\_\_ by our Un-cle Sam And now the lob-by-ist \_\_\_\_\_  
 Shoals \_\_\_\_\_ now aint that good news But Un-cle Sam wants \_\_\_\_\_

light - er his la - - bor \_\_\_\_\_ Dat's why we sing \_\_\_\_\_  
 of this great na - - tion \_\_\_\_\_ Says Mus-cle Shoals \_\_\_\_\_  
 oo - dles of bill - - ions \_\_\_\_\_ Just fo' de ham - - -

dem John Hen - ry blues \_\_\_\_\_ De big - gest  
 it aint worth a dam \_\_\_\_\_ Mis - tah  
 mer John Hen - ry used \_\_\_\_\_

## Morale

Let's to - geth - er (heh) all to - geth - er Hit'em hard

(heh) hit 'em high use yo' ham - mer

(heh) But not for knock - ing Here are some

good rea - sons why.

Emma Goldman knocked our Country  
 And to stop she did refuse  
 She's in Russia longing for Broadway  
 Trying to learn John Henry Blues.

Once a great man said to his people  
 They can't fight so we can't lose  
 He's in Holland chopping trees down  
 Trying to hum John Henry Blues.

Politicians knocked our liquor  
 So they took away our booze  
 Now the spenders and bar tenders  
 Harmonize John Henry Blues.

John Henry Blues - 4

## MORALE

And when misfortune seems to trail us  
 And the things we prize we lose  
 Just keep hammering this will never fail us  
 If we sing John Henry Blues.

# TRY THIS OVER ON YOUR PIANO

## Harlem Blues

by W. C. HANDY

Moderato (*Not Fast*)

*Vamp*

Voice

You

The first system of music features a vocal line on a single treble clef staff and piano accompaniment on grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The key signature has one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo is marked 'Moderato (Not Fast)'. The piano part begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic and includes a 'Vamp' section marked with a double bar line and repeat dots. The vocal line starts with the word 'You'.

ne-ver can tell\_ what's in a wo-man's mind, And

The second system continues the piano accompaniment and vocal line. The piano part starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The vocal line includes the lyrics 'ne-ver can tell\_ what's in a wo-man's mind, And'.

if she's from Har-lem, there's no use o' tryin'

The third system continues the piano accompaniment and vocal line. The piano part features a mix of piano (*p*) and forte (*f*) dynamics. The vocal line includes the lyrics 'if she's from Har-lem, there's no use o' tryin''.

Just like the tide . her mind comes and goes, like March weath - er

The fourth system concludes the piano accompaniment and vocal line. The piano part features a mix of piano (*p*) and forte (*f*) dynamics. The vocal line includes the lyrics 'Just like the tide . her mind comes and goes, like March weath - er'.

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