

Valley Life

Happy Birthday, Mr. Handy!

By Terry Pace
Valley Life Editor

FLORENCE — No one epitomized the soulful sounds of Southern blues like the man who invented the musical mold, W.C. Handy.

Nicknamed the "Father of the Blues," Handy rose from humble beginnings in a two-room log cabin to command performances at Carnegie Hall.

Florence, the town which Handy all his life proudly called home, pays tribute to his musical genius each August with a week-long W.C. Handy Festival of music and merriment. The next Handy celebration is still many months away, but a smaller-scale celebration of Handy's life and music is just around the proverbial corner.

A special day-long party honoring Handy will be held on Thursday, Nov. 16 — the 116th anniversary of the legendary composer's birth in Florence.

The "Music Jubilee" party will begin in the afternoon, at the log-cabin birthplace which has become a historic local treasure and an international tourist attraction. Organizers hope the birthday festivities will keep Handy's music in the hearts and minds of today's generation.

"It's going to be quite a celebration," said Wilder Liner, curator of the museum. "We'll be going back to Mr. Handy's roots, back to the spirituals he used to sing and play when he lived in Florence."

The public is invited to visit the Handy Home and Museum, located at 620 W. College St., from 11 a.m. until 1 p.m. for "fellowship and refreshments."

Beginning at 2 p.m., entertainment will be provided by the famed Alabama A&M University Choir. The choir will perform at the nearby Greater St. Paul AME Church, 141 S. Cherokee St.

At seven o'clock that evening, the Shoals Mass Choir will fill the church with its own distinctive sounds. The choirs are expected to perform many of the vintage spirituals Handy wrote or arranged during his lifetime career in secular as well as sacred music.

"Mr. Handy had a religious background," Liner remarked. "Both his father and his grandfather were ministers (at Greater St. Paul), and he was brought up in the church."

Liner noted that she's continually amazed by the number of visitors, from all corners of the world, who stop by the museum. Once inside, they're entranced by the wealth of Handy memorabilia, including his piano, trumpet, Braille sheet music, original recordings, books, correspondence and numerous awards and citations.

"A lot of them know about the music, and they know about Mr. Handy's life," she said. "When they find out his birthplace was here, and that it's now a museum, they want to come see it. In a lot of cases, it doesn't matter how far they have to travel."

Curiosity brings many people to the mu-



As part of her duties as curator of the Handy Home and Museum, Wilder Liner helps preserve priceless pieces of memorabilia that reflect the life and music of "The Father of the Blues," Florence native W.C. Handy.

seum, and Liner believes Handy's immortal music is still carried down from generation to generation — even though many of its listeners don't know who invented the seminal blues sound.

"The first three songs he wrote are probably the best known," Liner added. "You won't find anyone who hasn't heard 'St. Louis Blues.' They may not know the composer, but they know the music."

Events like the Handy festival and the birthday party are designed to attach Handy's identity to that unmistakable sound.

"He left us a wealth of great music," she said, "not only with blues, but with jazz and spirituals as well. This event will help keep his name alive, and his work."

Each of the Handy birthday events are free and open to the public. The celebration is funded in part by a grant from the Alabama State Council on the Arts and Humanities.

'Music Jubilee — A Birthday Party for W.C. Handy'

- When: Thursday, Nov. 16, 11 a.m.-1 p.m.; 7-8 p.m.
- Where: Handy Home and Museum, and Greater St. Paul AME Church, Florence
- Admission: Free
- Phone: 760-6434



W.C. Handy, "Father of the Blues"