

A Presentation to the
American Civil War Round Table of Australia (NSW Chapter)

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The Ballard of 'Blind Tom'



Blind Tom was one of the nineteenth century's most extraordinary performers. An autistic savant with an encyclopedic memory, an all-consuming passion for the piano, and mind-boggling capacity to replicate – musically and vocally – any sound he heard, his name was a byword for eccentricity and oddball genius.

Early Life

Blind Tom was born into slavery in Columbus, Georgia in 1848. His master disappointed by the birth of the 'useless burden' put the baby, his two older sisters and parents up for auction. To save her family, Tom's mother Charity begged a neighbor – General James Bethune - to buy them. At first he refused, but on the day of the sale, the lawyer and newspaperman turned up at the auction house and purchased the family.

Apart from his blindness, Tom was 'just like any other baby', Charity recalled, but a few months after arriving at the Bethune farm, the toddler began to echo the sounds around him. If a rooster crowed, he would make the same noise. If a bird sang, he would pursue it. He would attack his younger siblings just to hear the scream and if left in the cabin alone, would drag chairs across the floor, bang pan and pots together – anything to make a noise.

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By the age of four, Tom could repeat conversations ten minutes in length, yet was unable to express his own needs and his parents had to interpret his whines and tugs as best they could. Unless constantly watched, he would escape: to the chicken coop, woods and finally to the piano in his master's house, the sound of each note causing his young body to tremble in ecstasy. After a string of unwelcome visits, General Bethune finally recognized the stirrings of a musical prodigy in the raggedy slave child and installed him in the Big House where he underwent extensive tuition.

By six, Tom was performing to sell out crowds throughout Georgia. His early managers promoted him as an 'untutored', 'natural' musician - fully formed from the moment he first touched the piano - who could repeat any composition no matter how difficult after a single hearing.

The reality, of course, was not quite up to the showman's spiel. Certainly Blind Tom had a flawless memory and was extraordinarily adept at imitating, but even at the high point of his career, he was unable to reproduce complex polymorphic concertos after a single hearing. (He needed an entire afternoon to accomplish that). But if the piece has a recognizable harmony – a polka, waltz, slave song or minstrel hit - Tom could just about play it as an eight-year-old and easily nail it as a sixteen-year-old.

In 1858 when Tom was eight, General Bethune licensed him out to a traveling showman named Perry Oliver who transformed Tom into a Barnum-styled freak. The more beastly Tom was perceived to be – tongue lolling, arms outstretched like a hulking bear, 'the unmistakable stamp of idiocy on his face' - the more astonishing the transformation that took place when sat down at the piano and began to play with vim and grace.

Hard on the heels of Abraham Lincoln's presidential nomination in 1860, Perry Oliver brought Blind Tom to Washington DC, sensing that something was about to erupt. But the issues that so obsessed his manager - slavery, abolition and secession - meant little to Tom although, ironically, he became a cipher of the times. After a visit to a deeply divided House of Congress, Tom assigned to memory the congressmen's vitriol, then over the following weeks, served them up on stage to audiences howling with laughter.

Tom's inexplicable powers of imitation, music and memory also earned him an invitation to the White House where he performed before President James Buchanan.

Later in the election campaign Tom was taken to hear the Democrat's presidential candidate, Senator Stephen Douglas, and for years afterwards, he would deliver Douglas's rally speech replete with mannerisms and posture (and heckles and cheers from the crowd.)

With the outbreak of war, Tom enlisted his heart to Confederate cause – or so claimed his manager who staged a series of benefit concerts in aid of the Rebel war effort. In fact, Tom was as oblivious of sectional politics as he was to silent prayers of the slaves. Tom heard not these but the crunch of marching feet, rat-a-tat-tat of the drum and fife, boom of musketry and cannon and mayhem of battle.

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In 1862, he chann composed *The Battle of Manassas*, a piece white southerners heralded as a work of genius, although black audiences were less effusive – hardly surprising given Perry Oliver’s stage introduction, which spun it as a spontaneous expression of loyalty. However Oliver’s story does not tally with the facts and the wily showman seems to have used Tom as a propaganda tool to serve the Confederate cause.

In the decades following the Civil War, Blind Tom became a household name, celebrated by luminaries like Mark Twain and the mid-western novelist, Willa Cather. To sell out crowds across Europe and America (his tour schedule was relentless), he played virtuoso pieces to rival the nation’s best, then followed them up with unashamedly populist novelties: imitations of trains, banjos and music boxes, playing one piece with his left hand, another with his right while singing a third (then repeating the feat with his back to piano).

Audience members would challenge him to repeat, after a single hearing, a piece of music and by the time he hit his full virtuosic stride, he was virtually unbeatable. As the audience wildly applauded him, Tom would bound across the stage in a series of spectacular one-footed leaps, howling along with them. The American stage had never seen anything like him.

But Tom’s enormous fame filtered through the systemic racism of the period. In an age of when white culture basked in its self-appointed superiority, Tom’s so-called ‘idiocy’ was continuously confused and bound up with his African heritage. But his savant powers also made a nonsense of nineteenth century race theories. How could this be an example of ‘the lowest rung of humanity’, ‘a mind dredged of all intelligence and purity’? A century and a half ago, nobody had any earthly explanation, although several unearthly ones were floating about.

Séances, ouji boards and spectral materializations were all the rage in the late nineteenth century and many saw Tom as a medium - an empty vessel, channeling the genius of the great masters. Years earlier, the slaves of his home town of Columbus had reached a similar conclusion: Tom was blessed with the gift of ‘second sight’ and could communicate with spirits from other worlds. Indeed, some of Tom’s compositions seemed to be the fruit of a deep and profound dialogue with the natural and mechanical world. He would pass hours rapturously absorbed in a thunderstorm then sit down at the piano and play “something that the wind and rain said to me.”

Tom’s savant powers enabled him to revel in a sonic world alive with nuance and detail. Powered by an almost superhuman capacity to concentrate on details most people would find inconsequential, he could tune into a fantastically intricate world of differentiated repetition: the crank of the butter churn, the drip-drip-drip of water down a drainpipe, the clickety-clack of a train or warble of a bird. The bliss he experienced as he drank in these sounds, erroneously gave rise to the perception that he was always happy – even after being locked up in a hotel room for days at a time.

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Tom had no concept of money and was enslaved, deceived, manipulated and robbed blind by his white masters and guardians. Emancipation failed to deliver him from the shackles of slavery, his master's son – John Bethune – merely morphing into the role of guardian and manager. In 1872, Tom was adjudged insane and the vast sums of money he earned (the equivalent of \$5 million dollars today) financed Bethune's extravagant life. This inequitable arrangement continued unchallenged until 1884, when Bethune was killed in a railroad accident.

At the time of his death John Bethune was in the process of divorcing his wife and former New York landlady, Eliza Bethune. When she discovered she cut out of the will, she tracked down Tom's impoverished mother and persuaded her to move to New York to mount a legal challenge. It took three years of legal wrangling, but in 1887, victory was theirs and across the country newspapers reported that 'The Last American Slave' had been freed.

But the ending was not as rosy as the papers would suggest and Tom's so-called 'emancipation' proved to be little more than sham. Once Charity naively handed Tom's guardianship over to the Bethune's widow, she was unceremoniously dumped and sent back to Georgia, never to see her son again.

Blind Tom's final years were shrouded in secrecy and paranoia. It was widely believed he died in The Johnstown Flood of 1889 -America's biggest man-made disaster to date. In fact he was in one of three places: touring the backwaters of North America (his glory days long behind him), holed up in a New York apartment on the lower east side or listening to the roar of ocean at Eliza Bethune's country hideaway in wilds of New Jersey (purchased at his expense). In 1903 he made a brief comeback on the vaudeville stage.

He died of a stroke in 1908 at the age of sixty in a shabby Hoboken tenement and buried in an unmarked grave in Brooklyn's Evergreen Cemetery. Twenty years after his death, the daughter of his former master – Fanny Bethune – began efforts to reinter Tom's body into the Bethune family plot in Georgia. A Columbus resident insists he carried it out as best he could, Jim Crow laws forcing him to re-bury Tom at a nearby plantation. The Brooklyn cemetery, however, insists that Tom's body was never removed – the grave remained unmarked until 2002. Today, two plaques – one in Columbus Georgia, the other in Brooklyn - mark his burial place: a fitting end to the enigma of Blind Tom.

By Deirdre O'Connell, author of 'The Ballad of Blind Tom'.

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