

This Day in History... February 7, 1887

Birth of Eubie Blake

James Hubert "Eubie" Blake was born on February 7, 1887, in Baltimore, Maryland, at a moment when American music was on the verge of transformation. From those beginnings emerged a composer and pianist who would help shape ragtime, jazz, and Broadway for generations to come.

Blake was the son of former slaves and their only child to survive infancy. He had a talent for music from a young age. When he was only four or five years old, he wandered into a music store while out shopping with his mother. He sat down at an organ and just played freely. The shop owner then remarked to Blake's mother, "The child is a genius! It would be criminal to deprive him of the chance to make use of such a sublime, God-given talent."

Blake's parents bought him a pump organ and he started receiving music lessons from a neighbor by the time he was seven. When he was 15, Blake started playing piano in cafés and brothels. He was then hired by champion boxer Joe Gans to play at his hotel and he also played at clubs in Atlantic City and with vaudeville shows. He reportedly composed the "Charleston Rag" in 1899 when he was just 12 years old, though it wasn't put on paper until after he learned how to write music in 1915.

Blake met his partner – lyricist, vocalist, and band leader Noble Sissle in 1915. They were among the first African Americans to perform onstage without minstrel makeup. In 1921 Blake and Sissle wrote the hit Broadway show *Shuffle Along*, which was one of the first musicals to be written, produced, and directed by African Americans. It ran for 500 performances and paved the way for the Jazz Age of the 1920s.

The play featured Blake's most famous song, "I'm Just Wild About Harry." *Shuffle Along* also introduced three new stars: Paul Robeson, Florence Mills, and Josephine Baker. Blake wrote the hit songs "Memories of You," "Love Will Find a Way," and "Lovin' You the Way I Do." Additionally, he scored *The Chocolate Dandies*, a play which broke new ground for black performers.

Blake began recording his music in 1917, and in 1923, he appeared in three films for Lee de Forest. Blake also appeared in the 1932 short film "Pie, Pie, Blackbird." He served as a USO bandleader during World War II and retired from performing in 1946. Blake then entered New York University to study the Schillinger System of composing music. Over the next 20 years, Blake used this system to transcribe the songs he had created but never written down.

In his later years, Blake appeared frequently on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* and *The Merv Griffin Show*. He also appeared in the film *Scott Joplin* and received honorary doctorates from several universities. In 1978, a Broadway musical called *Eubie* was based on his songs and put him back in the spotlight, leading him to return to the stage. Blake was awarded the Medal of Freedom in 1981 and continued to play and record until his death on February 12, 1983.



From the 1995 Jazz Musicians Issue



Blake's rhythms helped set the sound of the 1920s, shaping the Jazz Age as it came into its own.


The 24th stamp in the Black Heritage Series.

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