

# Blake, Eubie

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**Memphis has W. C. Handy; New Orleans has Louis Armstrong; Baltimore has Eubie Blake.**

**Eubie Blake's story is one that stretches from Aggie Shelton's "Hookshop" (Eubie's own definition) in Baltimore to the White House in Washington D.C. in 1978.**

**From a humble beginning Blake rose to a man who redirected the course of American culture. His reputation was not done only through his music but by his artistic effort, his determination and his awesome talent. He was one of small group of African-American performing artists who paved the way for Blacks to demand and win acceptance and equality on the American entertainment scene, not only in securing a respectable position in the industry rather than just racially stereotyped roles, but in equality in payment according to the standards of white artists of the era.**

**James Hubert Blake was born on Feb. 12, 1883. His father and mother were freed slaves being owned by a master named Blake. Hubie was born at 319 Forrest Street. In 1894 the family moved to 414 North Eden Street. In the 1890s the family was residing at 1510 Jefferson Street. The house at the time of Hubie's birth was crowded with church women shouting such litany sayings as "the Good Lord!" "Emily is such a good woman," "We All sinner, Lord." "Have Mercy Lord." This chanting went on without a break until Hubie was born, the women's prays answered. There was one man present – Hubie's father – John Sumner Blake. The couple had been through childbirth ten times before, and Hubie was the first to live, although one child, a boy, lived for almost two months. John was 50 years old today. John worked as a stevedore and made nine-dollar s a week if it didn't rain.**

**John and Emily had married right after emancipation. While John was still with Master Blake he had sired 27 youngsters, so Hubie had that many half brothers and sisters.**

**Emily was a God fearing churchwomen, living her religion every day. On this day the mistress of ceremonies announced that it was a boy and the sound of applause resounded. Absolutely no one could have predicted how long a life this boy would have. John remarked "Bully, you're a real boy! (Bully was Hubie's father name for him)**

**Hubie was a frail child, a tiny infant. And giving his insalubrious environment, his slight physique, and the family history of mortality, it was unlikely that the boy would live longer than 51 one years - the**

actuarial table of Baltimore life. Who would ever think that he would live to be 100 years and five days old.

His mother called him Wally, his father called him Bully; friends and relatives called him Hubie and the kids on the block named him Mouse. Eubie speaks fondly and with much admiration of his parents. His mother he recalls as a pillar of virtue. His Father used to tell Eubie “everything I ever know I learned from reading.” He was insistent that Eubie get a good education, especially that he learns to read. When his father would come home from work he would sit with Eubie and make him read the Baltimore Sun. It was important to him that he keeps up with what was going on in the world.

John also was very strong on the evils of race hatred. Even though Eubie’s father had been a slave he insisted there was good and bad white people just as there were good and bad Negroes. He told Eubie stories of his experience as a slave. He related to his son how he once saw President Lincoln – “Ugliest man I ever saw!” He told Eubie of picking cotton from dawn to dusk and of receiving an unjust whipping by a sadistic overseer. He told Eubie how his master had discovered this, chastised the straw boss, and put a stop to the torment. John still had scars from the whipping on his back. While Emily objected to John’s telling his son about slavery, John continued to do so saying, “I want him to know about it, Emily. Everybody, especially every colored child, *needs* to know. In his later years Eubie still remembered the philosophical merits of his father’s words and never forgot them. They helped him to control any inevitable rages at the inequity and injustices of American society during this era. His father’s words helped Eubie cope with his experiences in show business and much of his father’s guidance always would remain in Eubie’s personality.

Emily, beside the many hours she spent in the church, supplemented the family income by doing other people’s wash. The one negative thing Eubie would say about his mother was “that among her unquestionable virtues did not include any mastery of the culinary arts.” “Oh, she was a terrible cook,” Eubie used to say.

Eubie loved sweets and any kind of dessert. Even at the age of 96 he would be seen dispatching four sugar doughnuts and a 7-up before retiring at 3 A. M. His diet left much to be desired. As a child he would buy a big bag of broken cake and cookies at the nearby bakery for 2 cents, eat them and not be able to eat his mother’s supper she had prepared for the family.

Eubie's father would seldom whip him. His mother, when she got angry with him, would suddenly strike him about the head. His father added a few extra commandments to Moses for Eubie: "Don't mess in the white folks' business!" and "Never run away. Stand up and fight." The first really meant that it is the people on top that run things and that "a smart man never bites the hand that feeds him. It is those that supplies the work." It is like today when it is said that rich people need tax breaks as they are the ones that can create jobs for the workers.

Eubie's musical experience began early in his life when he was just 4 or 5 years old. While out shopping with his mother he went into a music store, climbed on the bench of an organ and started 'foolin' around. When his mother found him the manager of the store says to her "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." Any resistance Emily had about Eubie's action was gone when the words "God-given talent" was spoken. The Blakes soon had a \$75 dollar pump organ in their house. Emily thought that music was justified only if it was doing the Lord's work. When Eubie played she was always suspicious and her ear sharpened when she detected any hint of Satan's syncopation.

Eubie was exposed to this syncopated rhythm in the music of the church and in the sounds coming from the nearby houses of ill repute. Eubie became a convert to the sounds of ragtime early in his musical career - especially in the playing of Jack the Bear Wilson and the aging Jesse Pickett. The first time Eubie heard the word ragtime was when his mother caught him playing "the devil's music," and remarked "Take that ragtime out of my house!"

Eubie received some music lesson from a next-door neighbor, Mrs. Margeret Marshall, an organist at a Methodist Church when he was about seven.

Eubie also heard syncopated music when he followed the funeral band to the cemetery and listened to their syncopated music on the way back from the cemetery. His mother had forbidden him to follow the funeral procession.

Eubie and three other boys formed a vocal quartet that sang renditions of "In the Gloaming," "Camptown Races," "Beautiful Dreamer," and other popular songs of the day. They were good enough to receive tips from the neighborhood saloon trade. One time Eubie took some of this money and bought some Overholt whiskey. When his father took him home his mother prayed all night over him. She told his father "This boy ain't dead, but I'm gonna Kill him."

When Eubie was around 12 he learned the cornet. He said playing it made his neck swell up. He played in Charlie “Cap” Harris’s band. The band would play at picnics, excursions, play on furniture wagons, and many of the activities the church sponsored. He received 50 cents for each job he played with the band. Eubie would fill up the holes in the music with some of his own ideas. The leader would say: “Cut that stuff out, Mouse. You don’t play that ragtime in my band.” Eubie soon quit the band.

Eubie was always careful with his appearance. He would dress up for church in high-button shoes, neatly starched collars, a necktie, and in a suit with knickers. His mother demanded cleanliness and Eubie learned that lesson early. He remained immaculate the rest of his life. His ensemble was always tasteful and carefully color-coordinated. Every item of apparel was flawless down to the fashionable folds of his handkerchief in his breast pocket.

Eubie was never interested in physical activity and competitive sports were anathema to him. Piano gave him his reason for not participating in them as he thought it important that he protect his ‘delicate but powerful’ hands.

Eubie also became a very excellent buck dancer and this talent was useful in his vaudeville performances.

The education institutes of his day did not have programs for the musical talented so Eubie ingeniously improvised his own musical schooling during his formative years. Part of his musical schooling came as he listened to pianist Jesse Pickett. Pickett played “The Dream Rag,” his own composition at the Chicago World’s Fair. Eubie could see Jesse playing through the open window of the bordello and study his fingerings. Pickett often talked to Eubie and encouraged him.

A few of the songs that were popular in 1896, and among the songs Eubie heard and learned were: “Eli Green’s Cake Walk,” “Mammy’s Little Pickaninny Boy,” and “Go to Sleep Kentucky Babe.”

Eubie also became interested in the music of Edward MacDowell’s. Thirty two years later Eubie used MacDowell’s “To a Wild Rose” as a basis for his hit “Memories of You.”

During the time his talents were blooming, he continued his apprenticeship under the auspices of madams. He was 15 (in 1898) when he began playing at Aggie Shelton’s bordello. Her bordello was considered one of the classy bordellos in the city of Baltimore. The place had a relaxed atmosphere and 6 to 8 assorted belles were always on hand to keep a marathon party going, and the atmosphere would not

have been the same without music. With the family's economic situation, Eubie's extraordinary talent, his incompatibility with the school system, his direction in music was somewhat guaranteed. It was while Eubie attended Primary School No. 2 at 200 East Street that he first met Avis Lee, whom he was to marry 15 years later. Avis called him 'dummy' (lovingly) because of his notoriously undistinguished academic performance. Avis was also a pianist and was said to have been a mathematical genius, beside being very beautiful.

Eubie never looked back. He was a favorite with the girls and their customers. He drifted from playing the popular songs of the day into semiclassical songs such as "Rustle of Spring" and the "Blue Danube Waltz."

He keep his job secret, sneaking out of his house after going to bed, getting a pair of long pants from a man in the pool hall for a quarter and head over to Aggie Shelton's. Eubie made a lot of tips. He remarked that: "the more tunes you'd know, the more money you'd make." "Hello My Ragtime Gal," "After the Ball," "You Made Me What I Am today, I Hope You're Satisfied," and any rags were popular with the customers.

His reputation continued to progress and so did his popularity with the girls – Eubie says that the girls were the main reason why he stayed with the music in the first place. (Eubie, throughout his life, did have extra marital affairs especially with Lottie of *Shuffle Along*. These affairs were often known by his two wives.)

The 1890s were a happy time for Eubie. With his job he had plenty of money. It was this fact that was to save him from his mother's rage when she found out what Eubie was doing. His mother, when first told of Eubie playing at Shelton's, didn't believe it was her Eubie. When she found out she replied: "Wait until your father gets home. You will receive the whipping of your life." When his father returned home he took Eubie upstairs and asked: "What have you been doing with the money?" Eubie showed his father the money he had hid under the oilcloth floor covering – most probably more money than the elder Blake had ever seen. It was now up to his father to placate Eubie's mother. "Now Emily," John remarked, "this boy is doing nothing wrong. He's gonna have to work, and this is good work with good pay. You just better leave him alone to do his work as he sees it."

Eubie's mother never did come to terms with his working at Shelton's though she couldn't fail to see the improved standard of living in the Blake household from that day on. Years later she was asked how

she felt about her son's musical career. Her answer – “He could have been using his talent to do the Lord's work.”

In 1899 Eubie completed his composition “Charleston Rag,” a work that would establish a foundation for the Eastern “Stride” style of piano playing. Eubie explained that he didn't write it down (with notes) in 1899, but that's when he composed it. “I didn't learn how to write until 1915.”

Eubie saw many touring Negro shows that passed through Baltimore. One “In Old Kentucky” was to be the one that Blake made his New York bow in 1902.” But first, in 1901, there arrived in Baltimore, The Dr. Frazier Caravan (Medicine Show). Eubie became a member of the troupe playing in the band, singing, showing his talent for buck dancing along with the chores expected of a show-business trouper. The small town of Fairfield, 35 miles from Baltimore is the place where the legend of Eubie Blake actually started. He soon resigned from the caravan having not been satisfied by the reception given by the community nor by Dr. Frazier's operation. He returned to Baltimore and at age 19 became part of the company of “In Old Kentucky,” and was on his way to New York City, an occasion that lasted only three days.

The year 1902 also marked the end of his career as a buck dancer. Returning to Baltimore he got a job as a relief pianist for Big Head Wilbur. He began at 4 P.M. and worked until midnight. During this engagement he wrote a piece called “Corner of Chestnut and Low” to celebrate the place – Alfred Greenfeld's saloon.

Eubie continued to refine his piano style and it was evolving into what might be called an “urban-oriented sound.” The characteristics of his bass, his relatively complex harmonies, and the dynamics of his concepts would later influence the playing of James P. Johnson, Fats Waller and the great Art Tatum. We must keep in mind that what Eubie was doing then is what is now regarded as modern.

In 1903 Eubie left Greenfeld's saloon and began playing in Annie Gilly's rowdy sporting house. It was a large hall where the “Johns” and the girls ‘whooped’ it up and you could barely hear the piano.

The time was ripe for Negro entertainers. Upward mobility was beginning for Negroes such as Jack Johnson and Bert Williams. Eubie was becoming prosperous and soon purchased a Jacobs piano. It was during this time that he developed a piece of unique character, which remained nameless for years and eventually, was published as “Eubie's

**Boogie.” It was the beginning of the formalization of his highly identifiable wobble-wobble bass style.**

**Eubie performed at Edmund’s Cafe on 28<sup>th</sup> Street in New York but returned to Baltimore for most of 1905 working at the Middle Section Assembly Club. While he still brought most of his pay home to his mother, he started to gamble, but soon was put on the right track by a man called Jew Abie, a professional gambler and Eubie, right then, swore off gambling and has never gambled since. Not even the horses and it is ironic that the Baltimore racetrack, Pimlico, has an annual race called the Eubie Blake Purse.**

**Eubie began working in Atlantic City during the summer months and thus avoided the hot Baltimore summers and the lull in entertainment that the heat brought on during the summer. It was there that Eubie met a 16-year-old pianist named James P. Johnson. Johnson played for Eubie his “Troublesome Ivories” piece and impressed Eubie with his talent.**

**Back in Baltimore after his summer he continued to play at the Middle Section Club. It was during this time that Eubie and Hughie Wolford worked together at this club. Eubie said that it was there that he actually wrote the piece “Raggin’ the Scale” which was later copyrighted by Ed Claypoole.**

**A highlight of 1905-06 was when Will Marion Cook came to the Middle Section Club. Eubie says: “much of what I became I owe to “Pops” Cook. It was then that Cook, when he asked the name of a piece Eubie wrote and played that night, named the piece “Sounds of Africa.” Later, when published it was called “Charleston Rag.” Cook brought him to Schirmer’s Publishing Company and the piece was accepted but the deal was spoiled by some eccentric behavior of Cook who accused the publisher of criticizing Blake. Blake would have to wait for the publication of the song.**

**Negro Joe Gans won the world’s lightweight boxing championship in 1907 and with his winnings opened the Goldfield Hotel in Baltimore. Gans hired Eubie and Boots Butler to play piano. Eubie at the time was 24 years old. Eubie continued to listen and learn as Gans also brought in One Leg Willie. Eubie remarked; “Nobody could copy him. He knew everything, the heaviest classic and any kind of rags. I learned plenty from just watchin’ him.”**

**During the three years he played at the Goldfield, Eubie’s creativity blossomed and he wrote “The Baltimore Todolo,” “Kitchen Tom,” “Tricky Fingers.” “Novelty Rag” and “Poor Katie Redd.”**

Playing at the Goldfield enabled Eubie to hobnob with the famous and powerful, as the Goldfield was the place where the wealthier Baltimoreans, and where sports and entertainment celebrities gathered.

Blake received the opportunity to accompany a number of great singing stars such as Mary Stafford, Lottie Dempsey, Alberta Hunter and others. Entertainers such as Eddie Foy and George M. Cohan came and heard Eubie play.

In July of 1910 Eubie married Avis Lee proposing to her during a car ride driven by a chauffeur Eubie hired, as he couldn't drive. Eubie brought Avis to Atlantic City and introduced her to his world. He was then working at the Boathouse nightclub.

Eubie's career from the end of 1910 to May of 1915 was a succession of good jobs playing piano at various locations. He continued to compose, writing "Chevy Chase" and "Fizz Water" in 1911." That year was also the year of "Troublesome Ivories," and "Brittwood Rag." As to the naming of the "Brittwood Rag" Eubie recalls:

"One day in the thirties I walked into the Brittwood Club in Harlem just to say hello to Willie Gant, a fine piano player. A man I had know for years. Now before I talk to him, I hear a piece he's playin' and I know it and I don't know it. I'm tryin' to think and it's so familiar, but I just can't place it. So he gets finished playin' it and we say "Hello" and I ask him. "What's the name of that piece you just played?" He gives me a funny look. He says, "I never did know the name of it. You wrote it. In fact you taught it to me almost 20 years ago." Eubie then remarked, "I never did give it a name, but then in honor of the place where Willie Gant was workin' I named it the "Brittwood Rag."

Eubie worked at Kelly's in Atlantic City for the summer of 1914 expecting to back in 1915. He never could have thought that events were about to come about that would lead to a legendary entertainment partnership between Eubie and a man named Noble Sissle. It was May 16, 1915 that he and Sissle met for the first time. Joe Porter's band was to play at Riverview Park in Baltimore with Eubie on piano. Singer Noble Sissle was coming from out of town to attend the engagement but was late and the band left without Sissle, who later finally arrived at the job. Eubie recalls that Sissle was always late. When talking with Noble, Eubie mentioned that he needed a lyricist and thus a long partnership began right there.

Their first song together "It's All Your Fault" was heard by Sophie Tucker and used by her. It was an instant hit, at least in Baltimore. In 1915 the team wrote "See America First." With Sissle's



New York connection Eubie found himself working in Long Island as a full-time pianist. During this time Sissle, Blake and James Reese Europe met and became close friends. Thus began an admiration for Europe by Eubie that remained until Europe's murder by his drummer. Blake always would venerate Europe's memory profoundly.

The duo of Sissle and Blake inevitably became well-known society entertainers along the Eastern seaboard, playing for the Goulds, Dodges, Schwabs, and Wanamakers, etc. Eubie also played the big dance jobs with Europe's band. Europe was booked into the best hotels and had very excellent musicians in the band. The musicians in Europe's band were all 'reading' musicians, a fact that many white people could not comprehend. They would say "Isn't it wonderful how these untrained, primitive musicians can pick up all the latest songs instantly without being able to read music?" A misconception of course. (One wonders if the great William Grant Still, the oboist in the band could read when he arranged for Paul Whiteman!)

Europe and Sissle enlisted into the Army at the time the United States entered the First World War. Blake formed a vaudeville duo with an entertainer named Broadway Jones. It was for Jones that Jerome Kern wrote "Old Man River" but they couldn't meet his price for singing it in "Showboat." The team lasted until Sissle got out of the Army. The two worked up a vaudeville routine and in 1919 found them on the Keith circuit as the "Dixie Duo." They opened in Bridgeport, Connecticut, then proceeded to the Harlem Opera House and then right into the Palace, the Mecca for vaudeville entertainers. They soon signed with M. Witmark & Sons as a songwriting team. The contribution of the Witmarks to the development of black musical talent cannot be overestimated. They produced the landmark Will Marion Cook's "Clorindy, the Origin of the Cakewalk." The songwriting duo was with Witmark for 10 years being paid 25 dollars each a week and two cents a copy for all sheet music sold. The team went with Warner Brothers in 1929 when the movie people bought out the Witmarks.

There is an interesting story Eubie tells about his relationship with Al Jolson and the first use of burnt cork for Jolson.

Eubie and Sissle were in Chicago about 1916 playing at an Erlanger Theater and Al Jolson was playing at another local theater, and that's when he put on cork. When Jolson left town, Eddie Cantor came into the use of cork. Sissle & Blake were the first Negro act in history to succeed in show business, often playing for white audiences, without cork. Before this, the white public would never take seriously

colored entertainers pretending to have the same creativity and emotional capacities as whites. The precedent of Sissle and Blake prepared the way for black artists who followed them the full spectrum of their own creative potential. Thus the duo presented other black entertainers a giant step forward in American culture, and a major achievement for the American Theater.

In 1920 the pair toured for Keith through Canada and the Northeast. It was during this time that Eubie wrote "Florodora Girls" for a Shubert Brothers Review. Also the pair wrote "Oriental Blues" and "Pickaninny Shoes," a number that was to be a feature for Sissle in the act for many, many years.

The act became a well-developed act with songs and sophisticated patter. It contained a series of set pieces with a few openings to accommodate the latest hit songs and any improvising that seemed appropriate for the moment. The finale, with Sissle singing "On Patrol in No Man's Land" and Eubie providing the bombardment on the piano, was almost too much for an audience to stand without cheering and stomping. They became a major theatrical attraction of the era.

Fate again stepped in at the Paul Laurence Dunbar Theater in early 1920. Sissle and Blake performed and on the same bill was the team of Miller and Lyles. Meeting for the first time it became a mutual admiration society and this meeting led to work on a project to be called "The Mayor of Jimtown." Not long after, in 1921, the project matured into the historic "Shuffle Along," perhaps the most influential and important Negro musical in the history of theater. In the book "American Musical Theatre" by Gerald Bordman we find a synopsis of the musical:

"Shuffle Again (5-23-21, 63<sup>rd</sup> Street) had been put together after a chance meeting in Philadelphia by two black teams, Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake (for lyrics and music) and Floureny Miller and Aubrey Lyles (for libretto). An angel was found and a limited amount of money made available. For costumes they purchased clothes from a fold show (Roly-Boly Eyes). The scenery was minimal. By hook or crook the company managed a series of one-night stands in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, always a step or two ahead of foreclosure, until it was felt the show was ready for New York. Although blacks had performed on Broadway and all-Negro shows had played in principal houses, in some respects there was more discrimination since the war. All the show could book was a dilapidated theatre, far from the main Broadway crowds, first-nighters were probably reminded by the plot of old

Williams and Walker, and Cole and Johnson shows. Steve Jenkins (Miller) and Sam Peck (Lyles), partners in a Jimtown grocery store, are rivals for the mayoralty – though each has assured the other he will be the winner’s chief of police. Jenkins, helped by a sharper of a campaign manager, wins. True to his word, he appoints Peck chief of police. But Peck soon realizes he has nothing to do, and the two fall out. Their corruption and inefficiency topped off now by their noisy squabbling, are too much even for lackadaisical Jimtown. Harry Walton (Roger Matthews) announces he is a reform candidate, and every citizen responds. ““”Just wild About Harry,” Jenkins and Peck are given the boot. The book represented no step forward for the musical theatre, but the music certainly did. Blake’s was a foot-stomping score. Its rhythms provoked an orgy of giddy dancing that had audiences shouting for more tap routines, soft shoes, buck and wing, and precision numbers. The hit of course was “I’m Just Wild About Harry.” Originally conceived as a waltz, it was much more at home as a fast-moving fox trot. Romberg and Friml tried the same trick for several years, but so innate was the waltz to their thinking that nothing productive resulted. But for Blake the waltz was alien, and his native rhythms, just coming to be understood by the more advanced critics and public, offered the more logical frame for his melodies. Though “I’m Just Wild About Harry” alone is remembered, the score was first class all the way. Whether in a stunning, ahead-of-its-time ballad like “Love Will find a Way” (sung by Matthews and Lottie Gee as his girl, Jessie) or in the racy festivity of “Bandana Days” (essentially a chorus number), Blake’s melodic gift and taste were unfailing. The brighter critics hailed the show, and the public slowly began to find its way uptown. Then midnight performances were added on Wednesday. Theatre and society people caught these late shows and spread the word. Suddenly *Shuffle Along* was a smash. By the time it was through it had reached 504 performances on Broadway alone. The show launched a flock of great names – Florence Mills, Josephine Baker, Hall Johnson. Single-handedly, *Shuffle Alone* made black shows voguish, or at least, acceptable.

With the success of *Shuffle Along* Sissle and Blake the careers of the duo blossomed and from 1923-25 would be considered the golden years for the team. They had no reason to suspect that within a decade the popularity of vaudeville would be dimming with the maturing the Hollywood talkies. In September of 1925 begin what was a sensational European tour and became the American Ambassadors of Syncopation.

Sissle loved England but Eubie couldn't wait to get home. Returning to the U.S. he immediately returned to Baltimore to see his mother and to "the smell of John Hopkins." The hometown paper's headline read: "Eubie Blake Back from Foreign Tour." His mother was living at 915 Ruland Avenue. It might be said, with all of Eubie's success and wealth, his mother remained suspicious of his activities, convinced that if the police didn't catch him and punish him for misdeeds, inevitably the devil would. She didn't question his musical talent but bemoaned the fact that it wasn't directed to doing the work of the Lord. Eubie was in Bridgeport, Connecticut that day in 1927 when he received the telegram telling him of his mother's death. He didn't know how he went on working but he did. Eubie's father had died 10 years before, reaching the age of 83.

In the summer of 1927 Sissle entered the duos dressing room and sits down. He says to Blake while looking at the floor: "I'm going to the American Legion convention in Paris." Blake asked him, "When you coming back?" No answer. Blake says, "Well, I guess this is the end of Sissle and Blake." Sissle never takes his eyes off the floor. He gets up and leaves. That was the end of Sissle and Blake. Sissle went to Paris and became a successful bandleader. Blake spent the rest of the year writing floorshows with lyricist Henry Creamer. With him Eubie wrote a number of great popular songs.

When asked about their relationship Sissle remarked in 1948: "Sometimes I get lonesome for the old man. You know I've never had the same satisfaction in collaborating with anyone else. He's a real genius. Most people don't recognize it yet, but someday there'll be songs of his that nobody's ever heard that everybody will know."

Andy Razaf another Blake lyricist, also spoke of his relationship with Blake:

"When you're writing lyrics to his music, you never know who's going to sing it. You might know the fact of the singer, but the style might not be as easily defined. The little lady who sang "Memories of You" in "Blackbirds" had a phenomenal range, and Eubie's melody is cleverly designed to show it off. An experienced lyricist has to watch out for certain things like, for instance, making sure that the high note is an open vowel sound. It's easier to sing a high 'you' than a high 'been.' Writing with Fats Waller I'm thinking of a stage with a piano and one great entertainer. When I write with Eubie, I think of big sets, a chorus line, elaborate costumes. Eubie's melodies lend themselves perfectly to sophisticated lyrics, and they're sort of a challenge, too, because

musically he's so far ahead of most contemporary popular composers. Some of those intervals in "You're Lucky to Me" were really innovative at that time. Ethel Waters really enjoyed singing that song. She said, "I've never sung changes like that before." I told her, "Neither has anyone else." Eubie has been first with so many things."

In September of 1927 Blake formed a new act with Broadway Jones and opened at the Lincoln Theater in Union City, New Jersey. The new duo played Patchogue and Lynbrook, Long Island, and New Britain, Connecticut. Their salary was \$50 a day. Eubie was satisfied, as it was never the money but the thrill of an audience that was his desire. He had enough money coming from ASCAP on the royalty for his songs.

In 1928 the two organized a 'tab-show' version of "Shuffle Along" entitled "Shuffle Along Jr." This venture lasted through 1929. By 1929 Vaudeville was doomed and talking pictures were everywhere. Then came the depression and stock market collapse in 1929,

In 1930 he was approached by Lew Leslie to work on his shows, which he called "Blackbirds." Eubie, working with the great lyricist Andy Razaf, supplied 28 songs (for an advance of \$3000. It was during this time that Eubie wrote: "You're Lucky to Me," and "Memories of You." The latter became a huge hit, recorded as an instrumental by Ben Goodman, and was as best seller in a version by the Casa Loma Orchestra. Seventeen year old Sonny Dunham's sensational trumpet solo was the instrumental achievement of the year. When Dunham formed his own orchestra he used "Memories" as his theme song. For Eubie, "Blackbirds" success was welcome as he conducted the show and was making \$250 a week, big money for 1930. But for Broadway, the run was about over.

In 1930 he was asked to write a melody to one of Jack Scholl's lyrics. The song "Loving You the Way I Do" became the Broadway hit of the year. Hollywood sent for Scholl but not for Eubie.

Still trying Broadway a revival of "Shuffle Along" was presented in 1933. It was a first class show that had seen its time and was too late for the present scene on Broadway. Nat King Cole was in the show.

There were hard times ahead for Eubie. He worked and did some show for the WPA but it was not until 1937 that one was produced. Entitled "Swing It," it was designed to exploit the talented style that was popular by Ben Goodman. The lyricist was Milton Reddie and produced two modest successes: "'Can' Get You Out of My Mind,"

and “You Were Born to Be Loved.” Eubie then again collaborated with Razaf in a wonderful production entitled “Tan Manhattan,” and it had a long run of the Ubangi Club. During this time he also fronted a 10-piece orchestra touring the TOBA circuit.

In 1938 another setback to Eubie came in the sickness of his wife Avis who was diagnosed with tuberculosis and was sent to a sanitarium. Of course Eubie was very distraught. Avis died at the age of 58. Eubie remarked: “In my life I never knew what it was to be alone. At first when avis got sick, I thought she just had a cold, but when time passed and she didn’t get better, I made her go to a doctor and we found out she had TB....I suppose I knew from when we found out she had the TB, I understood that it was just a matter of time.”

Forever after when Avis is mentioned it saddens Eubie. No matter how well one knew Eubie you never really knew anything about his emotional state. His personal values were always very personal and individualistic. Eubie wasn’t a man who ever knew how to cry and if in distress, it would be impossible to understand the degree and nature of his pain. When he talks of Avis his voice and manner lose some of his customary control. When he lost her he remarked: “I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t have any reason to do anything. No Kids, nobody.”

The coming of World War II drastically altered the direction of Eubie’s life. He was invited to lead an entertainment unit to play for the soldiers under the auspices of the USO. He was now 60 years old and threw himself into the project, writing and performing for camps from Savannah to Seattle and loved it. He had been too old for World War I and of course was too old for WWII but the show had plenty of girls and very appreciative audiences and he would never be too old for that. Toward the end of the War his loneliness came to an end and something wonderful happened. He met Marion Gant Tyler. They married on December 27, 1945. The couple returned to New York and moved into Marion’s four-story brownstone house in Brooklyn. Eubie liked to be looked after and at this time he needed looking after. Marion was the perfect wife for him, having experienced the world of show business and had the temperament, understanding that is needed to be married to a creative talent. Eubie star began to shine again with Marion’s help. She upgraded his ASCAP rating and began to supervise the use of his time and Eubie had only to perform if and when he pleases. Marion took charge of his career but when artistic matters needed to be resolved she left it up to Eubie. The perfect partner for Eubie. Feeling secure in his new life he decided at age 63 to enroll in New York University to study

composition with Joseph Schillinger. In June of 1950 Eubie at the age of 67 graduated from the university with a degree in music. In 1955 his thesis "Dictys on Seventh Avenue" was published. It had been his thesis equivalent for a Dr. Schramm's course, an application of the Schillinger system to Eubie's own compositional style. During his studies at the university his association with Sissle was reactivated, a relationship more social than musical. Impetus for the reunion came around 1948 when their old song "I'm Just Wild About Harry" was used as a Champaign song for the candidate and elected President Harry Truman. From this reunion came what Eubie described as their 'turkey,' an attempt at a revival of Shuffle Along. This was in 1952. The show failed probably because drastic, last minute changes destroyed the original concept, which by then was outdated and the times did not dictate a show of its character. It ran for only four performances.

But, again, Eubie's star was again beginning to shine. Rudi Blesh published "They All Played Ragtime." The book brought to an ignorant public who rediscovered Joplin, Lamb, Marshall, Blake and other giants of early ragtime. Then Max Morath, began his ragtime series on TV. A ragtime revival was under way with the music of Turk Murphy and others. Eubie made an appearance in a great TV production that featured him and three other pianists: Hoagy Carmichael, Dick Wellstood and Ralph Sutton. He was rarely seen in live performances but did make some recordings on Jan. 7, 1951. Victor's ShowTime series featured the vocalists and Eubie in the 1952 revival of Shuffle Along. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Records in 1958-59 made two LPs "The Wizard of Ragtime Piano," and "The Marches I Played on the Old Ragtime Piano," that featured Eubie. In 1955 Eubie performed at the summer musical get-together at Music Inn in Tanlgewood, impressing New Orleans trumpeter Johnny Wiggs and Doctor Edmund Souchon.

He was discovered by the academic world and did an oral interview at Rutgers University. And there were honors piling up: in 1965 ASCAP honored Eubie and Noble Sissle at Town Hall in New York; also in 1965 the pair were honored at the 36 annual Chicagoland Music Festival. The Sculptress Estelle V. Wright unveiled a bust of Eubie for the Museum of the City of New York.

But much more was in store for Eubie in his lifetime. In 1967 Marion and Eubie were invited to the Ragfest in St. Louis. Eubie's rapport and love of his audience would be fulfilled beyond what even he could have anticipated. Eubie was to give his first 'real' concert in the Theater of the *Goldenrod*. After an introduction Eubie sat down at the

piano in the pit of the theater – there was not one of stage. Here is how the evening proceeded. He first spoke to the audience:

**“Ladies and gentleman. I’ve been playing the piano for 70 years.”** (Applause) **“But this is a first. This is the first time I ever played with my back to the audience.”** (More applause) **“With your permission, after each number I’ll turn around and we’ll talk awhile.”** (The audience is not standing and cheering) Then Eubie played.

After it was over the audience was in a delirious state and almost couldn’t be contained. The audience response was more exciting than anyone could have predicted. No one expected anything like what Eubie presented that day. All they had wanted was to have Eubie in person to perhaps get an idea of how he sounded 50 years before. They couldn’t have imagined anybody giving the performance Eubie gave.

How did Eubie feel after his performance? **“I was just doin’ what I always have done. Tonight everybody was watching.”**

In 1969 John Hammond issued on Columbia Records a double LP album. Eubie Blake was again a big celebrity. Bags of fan mail appeared, leading jazz magazines (Mississippi Rag, Rag Times, the Ragtimer, and the Times and Newsweek had stories on Eubie. With all the notoriety Eubie, still willing and wanting to continue work in his field, he formed a partnership with his friend Carl Selzer to open a record company. He and Marion attended the premiere of Joplin’s opera **“Treemonisha”** early in 1972.

During 1972 Eubie made at least 40 public appearances. In July of 72 he appeared at the Newport-New York jazz Festival. On November 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> he played the Berlin Jazz Festival and back to New York on Dec. 3<sup>rd</sup> for a concert at Alice Tully Hall, and an appearance at the Philharmonic on Dec. 27<sup>th</sup> closed out a busy year.

But with the next year and Eubie a year older meant a quickening of the previous years pace. On Jan 27, 1973 he made an appearance on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson, and also on Black Omnibus and the Ralph Story show. Appearances at the Goodman Theater in Chicago and an appearance on Bookbeat followed.

Now they had to get back to New York for Eubie’s 90<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration. The president of the United States sent Eubie birthday greetings. Going to Baltimore on Feb.14, the city officially declared **“Salute Eubie Blake Day.”** But Eubie was not finished. On Feb. 16 he appeared at New York’s LaGuardia College and on the 28<sup>th</sup> he gave a solo piano concert at Town Hall. The list goes on and on. On March 8- the Mike Douglas TV Show; New York Univ. on the 26<sup>th</sup>; and on the 26



the Bill Rose show in L.A. While in L.A. he made another appearance on the Carson TV Show. On April 1<sup>st</sup> – the Leonard Feather Show; April 2<sup>nd</sup> - - a concert at the Wilshire-Ebell Theater in L.A.

Back in New York, an interview by Ebony and Women's Wear Daily (April 18,19); the 24<sup>th</sup>, another TV show with John Bartholomew Tucker. More honors from the Brooklyn Business and Professional Women's Club on May 6<sup>th</sup>. Then another appearance on the Carson Show, which had come to New York on May 11<sup>th</sup>. It was a hectic schedule for a man twice as young as Eubie, but, after 90 years on the ground, Eubie at last took to the air. On May 19, 1973, at the age of 90, Eubie made his initial flight – to Buffalo, New York to make some piano rolls. After this first flight it would lead to many others.

Perhaps the highlight of Eubie career as a Black American musician was his appearance with Dr. Fiedler and the Boston Pops Orchestra. Up on the podium Fiedler fronted an orchestra of 105 of the finest musicians in the land. The down beat came down and this 'huge' orchestra began to play Eubie's music with Eubie at the piano – little 'mouse' a little colored kid who had started his piano playing career in the hookshops of East Street in Baltimore, MD. The orchestra began to play "Memories of You" and Eubie was getting ready to play his solo but he couldn't see his fingers because of the tears in his eyes. But, right on cue, the spotlight came on and he began to play Memories. Then he played some ragtime. The audience was consumed in appreciation and almost uncontrollable. He felt like the atmosphere, the great orchestra behind him lifted he and his piano into the sky. Then it was over. Eubie sat with tears of joy rolling down his cheeks. He life had had many ups and down, many crescendos. But this one, he felt was the ultimate accolade. He could not see the audience through the bright lights and the tears but he could hear the thunderous applause and he gave them his customary over the head handclasp. It was then over but not before the inevitable autographs, the crowds waiting just to see or touch him or say a word to him. Finally they got into the car. Eubie turned nonchalantly to Marion and said, "Where do we go from here?" That was Eubie. But, of course there was more, much more.

On June 5, 1973 he received an honorary Doctorate from Brooklyn College; On June 10<sup>th</sup>, another ceremony, Tompkins Theater in New York was renamed the Eubie Blake Theater. And on the 28<sup>th</sup>, an award they Eubie wished he could have shared with his mother – he was honored by the Abyssinian Baptist Church.

One might get tired writing or reading about his numerous appearances – they go on and on: Would you believe Carnegie Hall on July 7<sup>th</sup>? Many more jazz fests in the U.S. and in Europe; more TV with Jack Parr and the Jerry Lewis Telethon; More appearances with October (the concert season) finding Eubie playing even more festivals and making appearances. His schedule just doesn't let up. A final appearance with Noble Sissle who mind seemed to be going which Eubie couldn't stand. Sissle died in Tamp. Florida on Dec. 17, 1975. Then more appearances for TV, concerts and an appearance again at Carnegie Hall with Ben Goodman. Another honorary Degree from Rutgers and one from the New England Conservatory, and another from Dartmouth University.

He attended a gathering of ragtime stars and scholars in Sedalia, Missouri, the home of Scott Joplin. In the audience were scholars who could relate to him the events of his career. They could name the catalog numbers on his recordings, and the hundreds of composition he had written. These facts astonished Eubie, a modest man. He had no idea that scholars were focused so intensely on his work.

In 1974 Eubie continued to play at jazz festivals and events in the states and overseas. His 1975 birthday was spent giving a concert at Harvard University. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of Feb. he was back in Baltimore attending the first running of the Eubie Blake Purse at Pimlico. There was a brief stay in the hospital from Oct. 19<sup>th</sup> through Nov. 2 and he took the rest of the year off. But, by mid-January 1976, he celebrated his 93<sup>rd</sup> birthday at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. An appearance at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival offered an opportunity to see a lot of old friends, playing "Chevy Chase," and "Poor Katie Redd." With the New Orleans Ragtime Orchestra of Bill Russell, the noted jazz historian. Back in L.A. he help salute Irving Berlin on April 27<sup>th</sup>, and on July 22 played the part of Will Williams the proprietor of the Maple Leaf Club in the movie of Scott Joplin's life.

While in New Orleans he was taken on a tour of the surrounding area, ending up at Tezcuco Plantation. Eubie stopped and asked if he could have his picture taken with the plantation house in the background. It was if he was thinking "This is where my family began. I have known royalty, travels over the world, but this is where I come from." He must have remembered his father's words that made sure he would never forget where he started – and he hadn't.

His article in the Mississippi Rag Magazine Eubie gave his thoughts on the playing of ragtime:

**“The most important element of Ragtime is the bass. Since the left hand provides the rhythmic pulse of the rag as well as the notes against which the melody is syncopated, it has to be strong, even and clear. A second extremely important element is proper use of the sustaining pedal so that it doesn’t sound too long or at the wrong times, causing the notes to sound muddy. The pedal is essential for achieving desired tones and coloring, but must never be used indiscriminately. One common fault is beating time with the pedal.**

**To learn a rag you must master and memorize four bars at a time. After the entire rag is learned, it can be played however one chooses. There is no reason to play the rag exactly as written and the player should insert his own ideas and personality. The more classic rags should not be rushed, but rags containing many single notes and runs, benefit from slightly increased tempos.....The modern piano players all sound alike because they don’t know how to use the left hand. (Eubie had a large span in his left hand making it easier for him to reach notes others can’t. Playing 10<sup>th</sup> with his left hand is central to his music and is easily done for Eubie. And you must use your left hand for rhythm. His performance is masterful and artistic, personal in its interpretation and the variety and quality of his compositions is astounding.**

**His compositions introduced new and modern concepts using melodic contours and intervals that they were incorporated and influenced in the normal musical idiom. The great Blake rags – “Charleston Rag,” “Chevy Chase,” “Brittwood Rag,” “Troublesome Ivories,” “and Tricky Fingers are found in the repertoire of most of the pianist that are capable and skillful technique wise to perform. Many of his compositions were too difficult for the parlor pianists to play. Schafer remarks that: “Blake’s ragtime is dense, intricate music, at once highly melodic, ingeniously ornamented, in a kind of neobaroque fashion and compellingly rhythmic.”**

**Other Blake compositions that are so compelling include: “Dictys on Seventh Avenue” his ‘graduation piece,’ his “”Capricious Harlem” a Gershwin-esque piece, and two exotic etudes – “Rain Drops” and “Butterfly,” written in the genre of Debussy (with a hint of Richard Strauss). Rain Drops has been described as “built on a single note set ingeniously, like a diamond, in a ring of complex chords. It is slow in tempo, a ‘mood’ piece and goes far in establishing Eubie’s credentials in the ranks of more classical idioms. “Butterfly” has a more programmatic character. And is said to capture flutters and silences in a gossamer of taste and sensitivity. Is it possible the same man wrote “If**

**You've Never Been Vamped by a Brownskin," or "My Handy Man Aint' Handy No More."**

**Eubie also wrote some waltzes, especially the one dedicated to his wife Emily entitled "Valse Marion." Another was named "Valse Erda" named for the wife of a couple he met while traveling on a train, written in return for the couple inviting him to dinner in the dining car of the train.**

**Eubie has always drank in moderation and used to smoke a couple of packs a day and says he's been doing that since he was six years old. Marion sees to it that a portion of protein finds its way into his diet. He loves fried oysters and says everybody from Baltimore loves oysters. He doesn't have much of an appetite until the desert comes. He has, throughout his life, had a sweet tooth.**

**On Sept. 23, 1978 "Eubie!" the Broadway show, opened at the Theater-Off-Park. A band of nine and a company 12 performed Blake's music, showcasing 23 of his tunes.**

### **Blake Sissle & James Reese Europe**

**Noble Sissle was born on July 10, 18889, in Indianapolis, Indiana. In high school Noble was a leader of the glee club and elected class vocalist. Noble chose a career in music rather than the ministry. After various successful experiences in the entertainment field Sissle met Blake and formed a most successful partnership. Sissle upon being introduced to Europe by a letter written by socialite Mary Brown Warburton was hired by Europe for one of his society orchestra. Sissle also secured a job for his partner Blake. In the book "A Life in Ragtime" by Reid Badger we read of this association with Europe and some background material on Blake's experience with Europe and more information on Blake from a another source of reference:**

**"Eubie Blake grew up in a vastly different world from that of his new partner. Both his father, John Sumner Blake, a stevedore and Civil War veteran, and his mother, Emily Johnston Blake, a laudress and devout Baptist, were former slaves. Out of 11 children born to the couple, only Eubie lived past infancy. The Blake neighborhood in East Baltimore into which he was born was a rough one where a youngster had to learn to use his wits and his fists, often against whites, to survive. His interest in music surfaced early, and he was allowed to played "godly music" on the family organ and to take piano lessons from the**

organist at his mother's church. He also listened to the syncopated music of the period, the ragtime, coming from the bars and pool halls and bawdy houses (he thought the spelling was "body house" 't the time), and he saw how much respect and admiration (especially from younger women) was accorded that first colorful generation of rag-pianists. By the time he was 15, he had heard Jesse Pickett play his "Dream Rag," with its sexy tango bass; he had been expelled from school for fighting over a girl; and his mother had resigned herself to her son's lost soul. He also found his first regular job as pianist at Agnes Sheldon's \$5.00 sporting house.

Blake remained at Sheldon's until 1901 when he went on the road with a minor touring group and later played various temporary jobs in New York and Baltimore. In 1907, he was hired by the Goldfield Hotel in Baltimore (a high-style establishment built by lightweight boxing champion, Joe Gans – whom Eubie had known in school). For the next 8 years he alternated winter season at the Goldfield and summers in Atlantic City, playing such colorful resorts as the Boathouse and the Bucket of blood. During these years, the dapper "Professor" Blake met and competed with some of the best-known pianists in the East, including One-Leg Willie Joseph, Lucky Roberts, Willie "the Lion" Smith, and a spindly youngster named James P. Johnson.

In addition to developing his technical abilities as a pianist and accompanist, Blake also continued to grow as a composer and writer. He later credited Franz Lehár and the English composer Leslie Stuart, whose light opera *Florodora* remained his favorite, for opening his ears to an expanded harmonic and melodic vocabulary. Another influence was Avis Lee, an accomplished classical pianist and "one of the ten most beautiful girls in Baltimore." Whom Blake married in 1910. Blake had written his first important piece, "Charleston Rag," in 1899, the same year as Scott Joplin's sensational "Maple Leaf Rag." By 1914 his first published rags – "Chevy Chase" and "Fizz Water" – had appeared thanks to an introduction provided by Luckey Roberts to publisher Joseph Stern. In the spring of 1915, when Sissle joined Joe Porter's Serenaders, Blake was looking for a lyricist to collaborate in writing popular songs. "Sissle," Blake recalled, "was a real square. A goody-goody. He never wanted to do nothin', "but he possessed a clear tenor voice, good diction, and a command of the language." It was enough; the unlikely pair formed a musical partnership that lasted almost half a century.

As a songwriting team, Sissle and Blake started quickly. Their first effort, written only a few days after the met, was called “It’s All Your Fault.” The legendary Sophie Tucker was then appearing at the Maryland Theatre in Baltimore, where Sissle and Blake wrangled an audition and performed it for her. Tucker liked the song and incorporated into her act, and Sissle and Blake were on their way. After the Serenaders disbanded at the end of the summer, Sissle signed with Bob Young’s sextet at the Hotel Kernan in Baltimore. In December he left with the group for Florida, where they were hired by the Royal Poinciana in Palm Beach. Just prior to this, Blake and Sissle had a second song, “Have a Good Time, Everybody,” picked up by Sophie Tucker, and their rising reputation led to the appearance at the Howard Theatre in Washington, D. C., in the first week of October.

Playing with Young’s group in Palm Beach during the winter of 1915-1916, Sissle got his first opportunity to perform before America’s high society – the Astors, Warburtons, Harrimans, and Wanamakers – who regularly spent part of the winter season in the South. The Young orchestra was also featured with singer Nora Bayes in a benefit that the popular songstress had organized for the Red Cross. In early 1916, E. f. Albee, head of the Keith vaudeville circuit (who had seen the show), brought Bayes and the Young sextet, with vocalist Noble Sissle, to New York City to appear in a “Palm Beach Week” at his Palace Theatre. At the end of the week’s show at the Palace, Sissle brought a letter of introduction he had been given by socialite Mary brown Warburton to James Reese Europe, and Europe, knowing that the Warburtons and his long-time patrons, the Wanamakers, were close friends, immediately offered Sissle a job with one of the society orchestras. Sissle also persuaded Europe to find a position for his partner, and Eubie Blake came north to join the Europe organization.

As performers, both Sissle and Blake fit the Europe model of the black professional entertainer perfectly. Sissle, as described by the *Freeman* in March 1916, always “appears in ‘straight’ dress – never resorts to slap-stick stuff,” and his appeal “is to the higher senses” while adding “a bit of comedy relish to his numbers.” Blake’s ability as a pianist and composer, the paper added, has already “set a new pace in instrumental productions,” and together the pair provides “an incentive to those in and out of the business to strive for nobler and higher ends in the art of ‘holding the mirror up to nature’ for the edification of mankind. Furthermore, Sissle – perhaps to a greater degree than his partner – and Blake both had experience performing and writing for

whites, and they both understood how to please them without demeaning their own personal or professional dignity. Like Europe, they were capable of appealing to both black and white audiences because, as Blake said, “we were exposed to it all. It was all part of our heritage.

Of course, James Reese Europe had been successfully cultivating Eastern high society, for a number of years; therefore, it was not a difficult matter for Sissle and Blake to adjust to his system and to become two of his closest and most trusted associates. It also did not take long for them to appreciate the larger goals of the Europe strategy, such as his dream of establishing a permanent National Negro Orchestra, which he had been committed to since the early days of the Clef Club..... “We were very lucky, Bill,” Blake later told William Bolcom, “that we were with a master thinker, James Reese Europe.”

Blake, was eventually promoted to an assistant orchestra leader from his earlier job as a solo pianist. Blake recalls that: “Europe’s musicians were well-treated and well-paid, sometimes earning as much as \$50 a date (the term *gig* for an engagement was invented by Europe, according to Blake), but they still found themselves having to make subtle compromises to their audience’s preconceptions. One of these, particularly galling to Blake, who with difficulty had taught himself, was pretending not to be able to read music. “Now the white bands all had their music stands, see.” He told Al Rose, “but the people wanted to believe that Negroes couldn’t learn to read music but had a natural talent for it. So we never played with no music.” “I’d get all the latest Broadway music from the publisher, and we’d learn the tunes and rehearse ‘em until we had ‘em all down pat. Never made no mistakes.” “ll the high-tone, big-time folks would say, ‘Isn’t it wonderful how these untrained, primitive musicians can pick up all the latest songs instantly without being able to read music?’” Among those ‘primitive musicians’ were Elliot Carpenter, William Grant Still, and Russell Smith. The truth was that the “Europe gang were absolute reading sharks. They could read a moving snake and if a fly lit on the paper he got played,” Eubie maintained. The one possibly positive outcome of this, from the standpoint of the central importance of improvisation to jazz, is that by not having the music in front of them the musicians may have felt more freedom to interpret the actual score. “Of course,” Blake admitted, “I’d always leave room for a little fakin,’ and them guys that could fake, they did it.

When they played private engagements for the Goulds, Vanderbilts, Schwabs, and Wanamakers, Europe’s musicians also

confronted other forms of the same sort of treatment. “We went into palaces,” Blake remembered, “but never by the front door. We didn’t use the regular Steinway, either. It was locked up and covered with velvet and flowers that said ‘Keep off the grass,’” but we ‘gave them better music than any okay ork could have played.”

Blake remembers an occasion about being hungry and asked the Wanamaker’s butler, who happened to be black. Europe tried to convince the musicians not to react to subtle insults. Blake recalls:

“The butler thinks he ain’t like other Negroes. He don’t like it when Jim complains. But anyway, in a little while they tell us to sit down at a table in this big room, and a waiter brings in this big china thing they use for soup, and he serves us all. I can’t wait now, see – we’re all dyin’ from hunger. Now we grab our spoons and as soon as I tasted this stuff, I had to spit it out. And I see eveybody else is doin’ the same thing. This stuff, I’m still sure, is the water they washed the dishes in – soap, everything. And it’s because the butler is mad, see. He don’t like no colored people to complain. But Europe – I see Europe is eatin’ the stuff just like it’s soup, he don’t pay it no mind, just keep eatin’! My God, I thought, that Europe will eat anything. Noe everybody else is wtchin’ him too, see. It ain’t just me. I realize Jim Europe didn’t get where he is with the white folks by complainin’. At home or in the white House, it was all the same to him. You couldn’t make him mad.”

Blake relates another story of his experience while with Europe:

“There was actually one thing that could get the Temp club’s leader extremely upset and that was when the behavior of one of the musicians threatened the reputation of the organization.”

Blake recalled one such incident:

“When he, Sissle, Europe, and a band of 20 musicians were hired to play for a yacht trip from Atlantic City to Maine, Carl Cook, a performer not a part of the original group, stowed away, and when he was discovered Eubie convinced Europe to let him stay and to do a number for the guests. Later, while Cook was doing his imitation of Bert Williams, he suddenly “reached over, pulled an expensive Panama hat off one of the men’s heads, and put it on his own head.” The crowd was silent and the hat’s owner,” after Cook replaced it, “without a word, removed his hat and threw it into the water. After an awkward moment everyone applauded, and the man . . . even gave Cook some money.” When Europe, who had been below the decks at the time, heard about it, he was furious.”



Eubie helped other musicians throughout his life. One such musician was Earl Hines, the great jazz pianist. W. Royal Stokes in his book "The Jazz Scene" describes a meeting Eubie had with Hines:

"By the time he was 20 Earl had been a professional musician for 5 years. One of those artists he refers to as coming through his home town, and from whom he no doubts borrowed a few licks, was pianist Eubie Blake, almost forty at the time and destined to remain an active performer for 60 more years, almost until the time of his death in 1983, five days after his hundredth birthday.

"After hearing me play, Blake says, "You'll never get anywhere staying around a little town like this 'cause it's off the beaten path. I think you should get out of here. If you don't get out of Pittsburgh, I'll take this cane and break it over your hear!" Fortunately, before he came back the following year, I was invited to come to Chicago, and in coming to Chicago the avenues opened up for me. ...."

Willie "Lion" Smith spoke of Eubie's help in knowing about a job opportunity:

"I was lucky, I grabbed the regular job at Kelly's for the summer of 1915 when Eubie tipped me off that he would not be back. He was heading for New York City to seek his fortune."

Smith also remarked: "b\y this time Eubie Blake was becoming known as a composer, and we all like a rag he had written called "Chevy Chase." I think some of his earlier tunes were better than the ones that he became famous for in later years. Everybody should remember his better-known songs like "I'm Just Wild About Harry," and, "Memories of You."

In his long career Eubie met most every jazz musician and they all have Eubie Blake stories to tell. In his autobiography Joe Darenbourg speaks of his meeting with Eubie in Seattle:

"About this time I went back to the Black and Tan Club and I had a chance to work with Eubie Blake. He had come to Seattle with a show which had ended its run there, so he decided to stay around and he worked down at the Black and Tan with us for a couple of weeks. What a nice guy he was. My good friends Floyd and Lucille Levin always doubted my veractiy when I told them about Eubie being in Seattle in 1934. In April 1980 I played a concert with Bob Higgins's band at Barnsdall Park in Hollywood and Eubie was there as a guest of Floyd and Lucille. I went over and started talking to Eubie about the different things that had happened in Seattle, about us getting drunk together

and working at the Black and Tan. Finally Eubie says, “Hey Joe, something’s been bothering me for 15 years. I’m sure glad to see you and maybe you can put my mind at ease. What was the name of the owner of the Black and tan? You remember the guy, he used to sleep all the time. He’d ask you a question, and before you could answer he would fall asleep.” I says, “Oh yeah, I remember. His name was Noodles Smith. He was so busy making money, he never got any rest.” Eubie just howled with laughter and he says, “That’s been worrying me for years trying to think of that guy’s name. I ain’t never run into anybody like that.”

In his book “Classic Jazz” Floyd Levin writes about Eubie’s regrets about ragtime’s association with brothels, etc.:

“Eubie regretted that ragtime’s early association with saloons and houses of prostitution earned it a reputation as “trashy” music. “We’re the only race that threw away its heritage because we were brain-washed by white people who couldn’t play it,” he once told me. “They said ragtime was ‘low down’ – and it wasn’t art. You will notice I never use the vulgar word ‘jazz’ – I always say ‘ragtime.’ By the time I was nineteen, with my long fingers, I could span an octave and a half. My mother always told me to keep my hands in my pockets – she was afraid people would imagine I was a pickpocket because of my long fingers. But I could play tenths easily.”

Around the turn of the century, “Little Hubie” began sneaking out of the house every night to play piano at a bordello in Baltimore’s tenderloin district. “I didn’t dare tell my parents about the job,” he said. “I was still a teenager – but I made more money in one night than my father made in a week working as a stevedore on the Baltimore docks. My mother took in washing to earn a few dollars. I hid my earnings under the linoleum in the parlor. Finally, when the pile got too high, I showed them the money. It was several hundred dollars. They no longer insisted I only play religious music.”

In 1919 Blake was touring the country with Jim Europe’s 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry Jazz Band when the bandleader was tragically murdered. Noble Sissle assumed leadership of the band for the remaining bookings, and he and Blake hit the vaudeville circuit when the tour ended. They billed themselves as the Dixie Duo, with Sissle singing and Blake at the piano. It was the beginning of a long, very successful partnership.

“Right from the start,” Eubie emphasized, “we refused to appear in ‘blackface’ – and no funny shoes and overalls. WE came out in

beautiful tuxedos, spoke proper grammar —none of that ‘dees’ and ‘dem’ stuff. Ours was the first Negro class act.” Assiduously avoiding the stereotypes that hampered black performers, they remained a class act throughout their careers.

In 1921, Sissle and Blake joined another black team, Milller and Lyles, in *Shuffle Along*, the first all-black Broadway show in more than a decade. It introduced “I’m Just Wild About Harry” and twenty additional Sissle-Blake tunes. The “showgirls” including Adelaide Hall, Josephine Baker, Freddie Washington, and Florence Mills, received \$30 a week. The show ran for 504 performances and spawned three *Shuffle Along* road companies, which broke color barriers in theaters all across the country.

Al Jolson’s 1927 film *The Jazz Singer* is usually identified as the first American motion picture to include sound; the first talking movie actually appeared four years earlier. It was advertised as a “De Forest Phonofilm – it actually talks and reproduces music without use of a phonograph.” Sissle and Blake were the only black performers in the stellar vaudeville cast, which also included Weber and Fields, Eddie Cantor, and Phil Baker. The film premiered at the Rivoli Theater in New York City in April 1923, making Sissle and Blake the first black performers to appear in a “talkie.” Blake made several more film appearances over the years. His last was in *Scott Joplin*, starring Billy Dee Williams, in 1976 - 53 years after his screen debut.

“Memories of You,” eubie Blake’s most successful ballad, written in collaboration with lyricist Andy Razaf, was in the Broadway show *Lew Leslie’s Black Birds of 1930*. Eubie was always generous in his praise for the Casa Loma Orchestra’s trumpet star, Sonny Dunham, who championed “Memories of You” as a jazz tune in the late ‘30s. Ben Goodman’s recording a few years later firmly established the tune as a standard.

During the 1930s, Blake collaborated with Noble Sissle for several New York and London shows. He toured as musical director for USO productions during World War II. After the war he joined the faculty of New York University and toured as a lecturer and ragtime artist. In the 1960s he resumed recording, and in 1972 he established a publishing company. In 1970 he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Eubie lived on Stuyvesant Avenue in a three story brownstone house, the family home of his second wife, Marion. (If Marion was not in the room, he slyly remarked, “When I got the chicken, I also got the coop!”) memories of a long career filled every corner of the house. From

the entry door, a long narrow stairway led up to their central living area. Hanging on both sides were framed tributes (including the Presidential Medal of Freedom) and honorary doctorates from Brooklyn College, Dartmouth, Rutgers, the University of Maryland, and the New England Conservatory. There were also medals, citations, and photos – including hundreds of autographed pictures of musicians, four U.S. presidents, and members of European royalty. This was his gallery. The small upstairs living room, dominated by a baby grand piano, was cluttered with pictures, records, and sheet music. He told me he practiced there three hours each day.

Although he lived to see his one hundredth birthday, Blake’s daily diet violated every nutritional guideline. His favorite meal consisted of half a dozen doughnuts and a bottle of 7-Up. “If I knew I’d live this long, I’d have taken better care of myself,” he once told me. “People think I’m always drunk, because I stagger a lot. I don’t drink anything; it’s my arthritis.” Blake did smoke, prolifically – two packs of cigarettes a day. “When I was a child,” he explained, “my mother always gave me a penny to buy candy on the way to school. I noticed the bigger kids bought cigarettes instead. I began smoking when I was six years old – and never stopped.”

Blake always seemed happiest on the stage. In the ‘70s and ‘80s, when his popularity was at its peak, it seemed he would continue forever. Although he resisted air travel until he was ninety, Eubie was a busy bicoastal entertainer. He said, “I’ve never been on a plane and never expect to unless I’m handcuffed to a sheriff.” He would arrive in Los Angeles by train to make guest appearances on talk shows hosted by Merv Griffin, Johnny Carson, and Mike Douglas. During those occasions, he usually visited our home, relaxing on a recliner, smoking a cigarette, and talking about musicians who had long been forgotten, including many who lived and died around the turn of the century. When I asked him about “One-Leg” Willie, a pianist he’d once mentioned in a letter, Blake said:

“His name was Willie Joseph. His mother worked for some rich white epole who recognized his talent and sent him to the Boston conservatory. He was the first Negro to graduate as a classical pianist. He lost a leg in a skating accident in 1900. In those days, Negroes weren’t supposed to read music. We pretended we couldn’t read and people would marvel at the way we could play show music and rags – they thought by ear. The only arrangement I ever copied was Willie’s “Stars and Stripes Forever” – I still play it.

In December 1979, the Huntington Hartford Theater in Hollywood hosted the West Coast premiere of Blake's Broadway show, *Eubie!* Lucille and I sat with Eubie and Marion in the front row. The gleam of a pinpoint spotlight hung like a halo over Eubie's bald head during the entire first act. After the final curtain calls, an on-stage ceremony honoring him featured surprise appearances from members of the show's New York cast, including Maurice and Gregory Hines. The after-show reception glittered with Hollywood stars, musicians and fans.

A few months later, Adelaide Hall, who had been living in London for forty years, made a rare appearance in New York City at Michael's Pub. We were the Blakes' dinner guests at the dazzling opening night and shared Eubie and Adelaide's reunion. Still youthful and attractive at 76, Hall reprised the momentous 1927 wordless vocal on Ellington's "Creole Love Call," confirming the still-regal splendor of her voice. Then she introduced Blake, who climbed on the stage to accompany her on "Memories of You.." Seated at our table between sets, the singer reminisced fondly with the eminent composer who had launched her career in 1923.

Blake often said he would never retire. "I'll keep performing until, on day while I'm on stage, the man upstairs says: "Nine, ten, you're out!"

A distinguished cast came together to celebrate Blake's one-hundredth birthday on Feb. 7, 1983, with an incredible two-hour concert. Adelaide Hall came from London to sing a medley of tunes from *Shuffle Along*, and pianists Dick Hyman, Dick Zimmerman, John Arpin, Max Morath, Billy Taylor, Terry Waldo, and Bobby Short added their talents to the show. The stellar rhythm section featured Howard Alden on banjo and guitar, Milt Hinton on bass, and Ron Traxler on drums.

Blake, stricken with pneumonia, was unable to attend the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday concert; he watched a special closed-circuit broadcast of the event. The huge bouquet of yellow roses next to his bed was a gift sent by his friend, comedian Bill Cosby.

It was five days after his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, when, as he predicted, the man upstairs said: "Nine, ten, you're out!" At the time Eubie took the final count, he was the only one left who could authentically talk about and play the music from the ragtime era. He was there at the beginning.

The Maryland Historical Society and the Baltimore Cultural Arts Program received his huge collection of memorabilia, documenting the

pianist's journey from bawdy houses to concert stages. The Eubie Blake National Museum and Cultural Center, also located in Baltimore, features several large displays and a bronze head of Eubie by noted sculptor Dr. William Douglas Hartley, a gift Lucille and I presented to the museum in 1988. Eubie Blake's life and work spanned a considerable portion of our nation's musical history. He began in medicine and minstrel shows, made cylinder recordings and piano rolls, and became a major force in the development of the American musical theater. His songs will continue to be a source of joy to music lovers.

Eubie Blake enriched the lives of countless friends and fans. I am fortunate to have been a member of both groups."

Eubie met Scott Joplin, the date Eubie gave varied from time to time but was sometime from 1907 to 1915. From Eubie's description of Joplin's health it was probably the latter date. This description is from "King of Ragtime" by Edward Berlin:

"They met at a reception in Washington, D. C., at which many ragtime pianists were present. Some of the best ones played, and then the crowd called upon Joplin to perform. He refused at first, mentioning to Blake that he was too sick. Finally, in response to the demands, Joplin sat at the piano and played *Maple Leaf Rag*: "So pitiful. He was so far gone with the dog (Syphilis) and he sounded like a little child tryin' to pick out a tune....I hated to see him tryin' so hard. He was so weak." He was dead but he was breathing. I went to see him after but he could hardly speak he was so ill."

Blake saw the end coming. According to Joplin's death certificate, he experienced the onset of his final illness in October 1915."

Eubie Blake was a major player and witness of the ragtime era. He was called upon many times to recall stories. To the end of his long life his mental faculties remained remarkably acute, and no one would accuse him of dishonesty. Blake's remembrance of his Joplin statements should be considered accurate.

### Ragtime and the March

The march is one of the major sources of ragtime composition. The cover descriptions, titles, and subtitles are the most explicit connection that is found. In checking the cover of an early piece we find the following description: "A Warmin' Up in Dixie" - Cakewalk, March and Two Step, Tepo di Marcia. Eubie spoke of this description:

“Blake referred to early ragtimers as “march kings”, and Blake realted how “One-Leg” Willie Joseph would “bring the house down with *The Stars and Stripes Forever* in march time, ragtime and ‘sixteen’ (bogie woogie). Ragging marches, and in particular Sousa marches, was “apparently common. “

Blake was often asked about whether the famous minstrel Ben Harney was black or white. He replied: “I never met Harney but all black ragtimers of the time “knew’ Harney was passing for white.”

Eubie’s music is not given the Tin Pan Alley label but is placed in the Eastern or in the stride school. The reason might be the inherently high quality of his music.

A major supporter of the revival of ragtime and one of its major influences was the book “They all Played Ragtime” by Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis. The wrote the following item on Eubie Blake:

“Eubie Blake was born in Baltimore on Feb. 7, 1883. At fifteen and a half years of age he was playing in the tenderloin. Far from approving of this, his mother did not even sanction any sort of secular music. As usual, the hard logic of economic necessity won out. Little Eubie, who cannot remember when he could not play, had a few lessons, but in the main he was self-taught. A neighbor told on him. “I heard someone playing, sounded just like little Hubie, at Aggie shelton’s bawdy house.” His mother said; “It is not my boy. He goes to bed at nine every night.” But Eubie had been getting up and into long pants and over the back fence.

Eubie was not one to fall for the lure of the red-light bohemia. In a year he was fixing his sights on a goal that then seemed more easily attainable for the Negro, that of an equal participation with white in the theatrical world. And, as near as any Negro in America has ever been able to reach that goal, Eubie attained it.

Eubie was one of the first of the Eastern Negro ragtimers to get his instrumental pieces published, though his junior, Luckey Roberts beat him by one year with his *Junk Man Rag*. Eubie had tried early enough to crash the Tin Pan Alley barriers. He would play a number like his early unpublished *Carhleston Rag* or, a few years later, his *Black Keys on Parade* for Joseph W. Stern, and the publisher would say: “Sure it’s good – it’s wonderful – but who could play it but you and Luckey Roberts.

Meeting the early tycoons of the music business, Eubie learned what was expected of the Negro; “None of us were supposed to know how to read music. They wanted folk stuff. If we could read, we had to

pretend we couldn't. The day before a show opened we'd get the music. They'd come to the spots after the show and hear us playing the tunes and say: "Aren't they marvellous?"

The house of Stern eventually published several Blake piano solos. The first two, appearing in 1914, were the melodic rags *Chevy Chase* and *Fizz Water*. The scores, greatly simplified at the publisher's request, give only a faint idea of the intricacy of these numbers as Eubie or James P. Johnson actually played them. *Bugle Call Rag* followed in 1916. It is a rag of three strains in which over the ragtime bass the thumb of the right hand plays the bugle calls with the four fingers executing an independent counterpoint. Some of Eubie's finest solos remain unpublished chiefly because of their extreme difficulty of execution. Among these is a real syncopated masterpiece, *Troublesome Ivories*."

After *Shuffle Along* in 1921 the next important Sissle and Blake collaboration was *Chocolate Dandies* of 1924, with its hit tunes, "*Manda, Thinking of Me, and Dixie Moon*. *Chocolate Dandies* was at Ford's Theater-Broadway at 61<sup>st</sup> Street and then was on tour for 8 months.

But despite Eubie's great works for the stage, we find a folk strain in his music. He talks about the difference between a instrument played by a child and then by a musician:

"Eubie thinks of old-timers whose sole instrument was the triangle. "What rhythms!" he says. "There is a lost art!" "What is a legitimate instrument?" he asks. "Why is it a drum and not a washboard? Give the finest drums in the world to a kid and they're only toys, but give a washboard to a drummer and you've got a rhythm instrument."

### Eubie's Performance Reviews

Eubie playing in the 1969 New Orleans Jazz Fest:

"The festival's most impressive segment may have been a 12-minute interval by a frail, 86 year old pianist. He needed assistance entering the stage when producer Willis Conover announced his name. As the applause mounted, his halting gait became a vigorous stride, until at last the little man was scampering toward the piano bench with his hands clasped over his head like a prize fighter. The next few moments were sheer magic. The pianist played with power and joy, juxtaposing an intricate right hand melody against an electrifying left-handed "oom-pah" bass to create an intense ragtime syncopation."



**Another review in the Jazz Journal stated:**

**“An 86 year old charmer, Eubie Blake, recalled an era when ragtime was the vogue. After shocking his southern audience with a few irreverent bars of “Marching Through Georgia” the composer-pianist exchanged some ad-lib remarks with Willis Conover before striding into his “Charleston Rag.” He paid tribute to his contemporary C. Luckey Roberts with the latter’s “Spanish Venus,” followed by a most stirring ragtime version of Sousa’s “Stars and Stripes Forever.” The Blake-Razaf classic “Memories of You” received an ovation from the appreciative audience responding warmly to Eubie Blake’s youthful ebullience.”**

**In the book “The Art of Ragtime” Schafer writes:**

**“Others, like Eubie Blake worked schizophrenically – with one side of their lives heavily involved in the demands of commercial composition and another, private portion of their existence committed to pure ragtime.**

**Eubie Blake has recalled that ragtime style, syncopations were in the air in the black community before he knew what ‘ragtime’ meant: “I didn’t hear ragtime until a little later, but I heard syncopation in the Negro bands coming back from funerals and, of course, in the shouting in the church.”**

**That was all right, it seems, but not at home. I’m in there ragging hell out of Traumerei on the organ and my mother opened the door and laid down the law. “Take that ragtime out of my house.” That was the first time I ever heard the word.”**

**Blake succeeded as itinerant popular composer and kept the original ragtime idea intact in his music.**

**Eubie Blake whose long and busy lifetime in the music business testifies to his commitment and seriousness, wrote only a few rags, although he, liked most ragtime entertainers, has a vast repertoire of unwritten original compositions. He then went on into commercial work with the musical stage and with jazz forms.**

**Eubie Blake, a virtuoso player with large, nimble hands, capable of playing incredibly demanding “trick” passages. The published scores of their rags are considerably simpler and less exhibitionistic than their performances of the same works. Publishers considered their works**

too “advanced” or complex for the music-buying public and accordingly demanded printed scores which are in effect outlines or synopsis of the performance style.

The whole nascent tradition of Harlem shout-piano styles stemmed from ragtime-oriented players like Blake. Blake went on to write successful music for revues, thus preserving their ragtime-derived ideas inside the various forms of popular music.”

In “The Jazz revolution” Kathy J. Ogren spoke of Blake and Sissle’s appearance on the Keith Vaudeville circuit which primarily was a white orientated circuit:

“Eubie Blake was part of the vaudeville team “Sissle and Blake,” who performed on the very popular Keith circuit. Keith was a predominantly white circuit, and Blake believed that the black’s acts were purposefully booked in the second act in order to prevent them from getting a good review from the newspaper critics, who always came in the third act. Blake believed these shows further exposed white producers as well as audiences to black musical skills.”

In Rags and Ragtime” by Jasen and Tichenor we read:

“The world stride means the syncopation alternating between the right and left hands and the counter melodies created by a moving bass line. This was putting a new twist on the regular way to play ragtime – alternating the syncopation between both hands made it twice as difficult to perform, thereby enabling the performers to win on tests. It not only sounded harder to do, it was in fact harder to do. And, unlike the rest of ragtime stride was conceived by and originally performed by black artists....”

Eubie was a major influence in developing and performing this ‘stride’ ragtime piano style that was so much an influence on other black and white ragtime pianists.

In “They all Played ragtime” by Blesh and Janis we read about this new style:

“A different, another sort of ragtime was rising along the Atlantic seaboard. The account of this distinctive music – different both melodically and harmonically from classic ragtime.”

In the book “My Life in Ragtime” by Badger we read:

**“Blake also liked the melodies of MacDowell, his “Memories of You” was in fact based upon MacDowell’s “To a Wild Rose,” which he first heard in the 1890s, and Victor Herbert, whose “Gypsy Love Call” was the inspiration for Blake’s own “Gypsy Blues.”**