

George Handy Biography

By Benjamin Bierman

The biography of the composer-arranger-pianist George Handy (1920-1997) is similar to that of countless musicians: a peripatetic career of highs and lows (both artistic and financial) creating the typical ebb and flow of the freelance musician. Handy's career was unusual, however, in that he enjoyed tremendous artistic and financial success, though admittedly for only a short period, as well as great influence in his field.

Handy's best-known compositions and arrangements were written for a dance band, the Boyd Raeburn Orchestra. Handy worked for Raeburn as pianist, primary arranger, and composer, as well as musical director, on and off from 1944-1946, and was given unusually free rein. His experimental approach during this period makes Handy an important member of a small group of composers and arrangers, including Eddie Sauter (1914-1981), Pete Rugolo (1915-), Ralph Burns (1922-2001), Bob Graettinger (1923-1957), Gil Evans (1912-1988), and Gerry Mulligan (1927-1996), working in what is generally referred to as a modernist or progressive style in the late 1930s through the early 1950s. This style emphasized advanced compositional resources, and generally downplayed the role of improvisation.

George Handy burst onto the music scene in a stunning manner, taking the big band world by surprise with an individualistic brand of experimentalism. For a short period (from approximately 1945 to 1947), Handy was considered one of the top arrangers and composers in the jazz field. After that time, except for periods of activity in the 1950s and '60s, largely because of the normal vagaries of the music business and difficulties in his personal life, including a eighteen-year addiction to heroin and a life-long dependency on methadone that followed, Handy disappeared from the radar of the music world almost as quickly as he had arrived. He never returned in an artistically significant manner. While active, however, his works were influential, and compositions such as *Dalvatore Sally* and *The Bloos* are still recognized by aficionados as seminal works in the "progressive" genre.

Musicians, critics, and scholars generally acknowledge Handy's artistic merit and importance as a jazz modernist, yet in many ways he has remained in the shadow of other Raeburn arrangers, such as Burns, Johnny Mandel (1925-), and Johnny Richards (1911-1968), all of whom became extremely successful commercially. While not necessarily more important or progressive than these other writers, Handy nevertheless made an important contribution to the evolution of jazz composition. Perhaps because his mercurial career brought him in and out of the musical limelight so rapidly, this contribution has been overlooked and is in need of re-evaluation.

It is challenging to assess Handy's influence on jazz composers, as the number of composers and performers that had contact with him and his music is relatively small. In addition, Handy was such an individualist and iconoclast that direct influences upon or from him are difficult to trace. Handy's free and individualistic spirit, and the fierceness of his independence, is perhaps his greatest legacy. He inspired a group of composers, many of whom have spoken of Handy reverently, that went on to create a significant body of jazz composition.

Handy drew from an unusually wide palette of sources and techniques, particularly for a jazz composer in the 1940s and '50s. He continued to mine these sources throughout the various stages of his career. In addition, several consistent elements in Handy's music are particularly responsible for a recognizable style. Handy had an unusual approach to chords, chromatic voice leading dominates many of his harmonic progressions, and interval-class 1, as a family of intervals (minor-seconds, major-sevenths, and minor-ninths), is an essential element. Semitones are crucial to Handy's style, both melodically (for motivic generation) and harmonically (as a source of resolution, in place of the dominant to tonic relationship); major-sevenths are used to create both consonance (as a chord tone in a variety of inversions) and dissonance (as open intervals in exposed passages); and the dissonance and resolution of minor-ninths are vital compositional elements. As a result, though the overall quality of Handy's music is tonal, it is frequently difficult to identify a key or centric area.

Handy's professional music career began at age fourteen or fifteen. Little by little, finally realizing that he was not cut out to follow in his father's footsteps as a doctor, the family sent him to The Juilliard School and then to New York University. Handy did not do well in these environments. After these experiences, Handy's mother sent him to study composition privately with Aaron Copland. His feelings about his studies with Copland are summed up as Handy describes his studies with Copland in the liner notes for the record set, *The Jazz Scene*: "Studied privately with Aaron Copland for a while, which did neither of us any good."

An informal setting was perhaps much more valuable to Handy's musical education. His Brownsville neighborhood in Brooklyn was home to a surprising number of young musicians, all of whom would soon rise through the ranks to become successful jazz artists. The group included, among others, vibraphonist Terry Gibbs, saxophonist-composer-arranger Al Cohn, saxophonist Frank Socolow, and drummer-arranger Tiny Kahn. It later grew to include trombonist-arranger Johnny Mandel, arranger Manny Albam, pianist Lou Levy, and trumpeter Conte Candoli. They spent a great deal of time together in Socolow's basement, where they would sometimes play, but primarily talked and listened to music (and smoked marijuana). It was in these valuable get-togethers that someone introduced them to the new sounds of bebop that were evolving in New York City. They also spent much of their time listening to classical composers, such as Stravinsky, Bartók, and Varèse.

Some of Handy's early important associations were with Raymond Scott, Jack Teagarden, Lionel Hampton, and Mugsy Spanier. Handy's next professional association, with the Boyd Raeburn Orchestra, was the most significant of his career, and produced the majority of Handy's important compositions. Handy met Raeburn through his future songwriting partner, the lyricist Jack Segal. Raeburn initially hired Handy to write arrangements, and in early 1944 asked him to join the band as pianist. Handy was with the band for two one-year stints separated by a six-month hiatus (1944-46).

Boyd Raeburn was primarily a bandleader, and played saxophone as well, predominantly the baritone and bass saxes. He had commercial bands as early as 1933, playing middle-of-the-road popular music in Chicago hotels. The character of his repertoire changed dramatically around 1943 when Eddie Finckel and Ralph Flanagan joined the band. The arrangements they wrote, and the influence they wielded over new

personnel decisions, transformed the Raeburn band from an undistinguished dance orchestra to a dynamic and experimental jazz big band.

Raeburn's band had a certain degree of success, but commercially had difficulty rising above the second rank. Musicians, however, thought well of the band, and there was positive critical reaction to the orchestra as well. Trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie's arrangement, *Interlude* (which would eventually be called *Night In Tunisia*, and be one of Gillespie's biggest hits), was first recorded by Raeburn, and featured Gillespie as soloist. The Raeburn orchestra was a white band, but a number of African American instrumental stars played with the group when it was in New York City, including Roy Eldridge, Oscar Pettiford, Benny Harris, Trummy Young, and Charlie "Bird" Parker. Other instrumentalists that were to go on to jazz stardom were regulars with the band, such as Serge Chaloff, Shelly Manne, and Al Cohn. Aside from the occasional jazz stars, the band's biggest attraction was the alto saxophonist Johnny Bothwell (at times dubbed "the white Johnny Hodges," after Duke Ellington's well-known lead alto player).

In November of 1944, after encouragement from Betty Hutton (she and Handy had a short, torrid affair while on tour with Raeburn), Handy left Raeburn and moved to Los Angeles to concentrate on songwriting, again partnering with lyricist Jack Segal (lyricist for songs such as "When Sunny Gets Blue," and "When Joanna Loved Me"). Hutton had introduced Handy to Johnny Mercer from Capitol Records. In addition to Capitol, Handy and Segal's material was shown to the Paramount music division. Both companies liked the songs, and, all of a sudden, Handy and Segal had contracts with both Capitol Records and Paramount. They were on staff, and Handy became a successful, highly visible composer. As some of his songs were appreciated and recorded, Handy's salary increased, and he was doing quite well financially.

In June of 1945, disenchanted with Hollywood, Handy rejoined the Raeburn band. Raeburn's current pianist was injured during an important engagement at the Palace Hotel in San Francisco, and saxophonist Hal McKusick and Johnny Mandel (who played trombone on the band and also contributed arrangements) convinced a reluctant Raeburn to rehire Handy). Handy recalls:

I went back and rejoined the band and he wanted a chart on *There's No You* and I sat down and I can't tell you what happened but there was a click in my life, something clicked, all the fences went down and I could see, my horizon was limitless, I could write anything I wanted anytime.

This was a major turning point for Handy, and marks the beginning of the most productive and important part of his writing career. Before even beginning to write *There's No You*, Handy realized he had crossed a barrier, and felt great artistic freedom. Handy recounts that when the band played the chart, the musicians were surprised, and that "everyone was delighted." Handy states that after writing *There's No You*, many of his most important works, such as *Dalvatore Sally*, *Yerxa*, *Gray Suede*, *Special Maid*, *Hey Look I'm Dancing*, and *Key F (Keef)* "just poured out of me at that point":

This final stint with Raeburn, from approximately June 1945 through July or August 1946, was the apex of George Handy's career, and, correspondingly, the high point of the Raeburn orchestra's existence. It was a dramatic encounter, as Handy burst back onto the scene with an entirely new conception and musical freedom, briefly

thrusting him and the Raeburn band into the forefront of the jazz scene and the “progressive” compositional movement. This period is largely responsible for Handy’s reputation as a composer and arranger.

The speed and intensity with which this creative transition occurred took everyone by surprise. Handy wrote the majority of his seminal instrumental works, such as *Dalvatore Sally*, *Tonsillectomy*, and *Yerxa*, as well as some experimental and creative vocal arrangements, including *Forgetful*, *I Can’t Believe That You’re in Love With Me*, *I Don’t Know Why*, and *Temptation*, in a matter of weeks. The importance of these works to the “progressive” jazz movement is difficult to pinpoint, as the composers in this genre do not speak openly about their influences. However, the importance of Handy’s work is demonstrated by the interest shown in his compositions by other major proponents of this style.

During Raeburn’s Palace Hotel engagement, Stan Kenton directed his musicians, who were also in San Francisco at the time, to attend Raeburn’s rehearsals, as he felt that Handy’s writing was leading jazz composition in a new direction. Kenton’s chief composer and arranger, Pete Rugolo (one of the more important of the “progressive” composers), regularly came and took notes while listening to the band. Kenton also commissioned a composition by Handy, but the work was never completed. Eddie Sauter, who was writing important modernist compositions before and after Handy, spoke openly of being envious of the compositional opportunities Raeburn gave to Handy. Sauter describes never having had that kind of artistic independence, even with his own band, the Sauter-Finegan Orchestra. Duke Ellington thought highly enough of the Raeburn band to offer his financial assistance during a time of fiscal crisis, as did the singer and bandleader Billy Eckstine. Tadd Dameron, an important composer and arranger of this period, cited Handy as one of his favorite arrangers.

Johnny Mandel, one of the premier jazz arrangers and composers for many years (and the winner of many of the music business’s highest awards, including an Academy award, Grammy awards, and Emmy awards), speaks of Handy in wildly laudatory terms. At the same time, he expresses great frustration when he thinks about what could have been had Handy not been so badly addicted to drugs. Mandel describes Handy as “extraordinarily gifted,” and felt that Handy was “definitely in the genius category. He was tremendous.” Mandel feels that Handy was ahead of everyone else writing at that time. When asked regarding important influences on Handy, Mandel said, “I can’t think of any influences he might have had. He didn’t sound like anybody else. Mandel distinguishes Handy from Pete Rugolo, Bill Russo, and most of the others that wrote for Kenton, and feels that they intellectualized the process of composing, whereas Handy was more loosely creative and more interested in swinging the band.

This period of Handy’s career was capped by a major recording project that served as a bookend to his Raeburn tenure. Norman Granz commissioned Handy to write a composition for Granz’s ambitious boxed record set, *The Jazz Scene*, and Handy wrote a piece for jazz big band plus strings and woodwinds, *The Bloos*. For this commission, Handy (as was true for the other artists as well) was given carte blanche in regards to content and instrumentation. Though it is not clear whether Handy wrote *The Bloos* while with Raeburn, or just after his departure, the composition was recorded in October 1946 (though the actual record set was not released until 1949), shortly after Handy had left the Raeburn band. Handy’s contribution to *The Jazz Scene* displays him at the peak

of his creativity, and rates, along with *Dalvatore Sally*, as his most well-known, and perhaps most important work.

After leaving the Raeburn band, Handy returned to New York. By this time, however, Handy had begun to experiment with heroin, and once he was back in New York, his use grew into a serious addiction that lasted for eighteen years. In 1949, Handy's contribution to the liner notes for *The Jazz Scene* record set give a good indication of his feelings about the music business, as well as of his overall state of mind: "Raeburn, Babe Russin, Alvino Rey, Buddy Rich, Benny Goodman are some of the bands I've written for. None of them play anything of mine now. Only thing worthwhile in my life is my wife Flo and my boy Mike. The rest stinks, including the music biz and all connected. I'm still living. George Handy."

Given his addiction and the general malaise evinced by the above quote, it is not surprising that after leaving Raeburn, Handy's life and career went into a downward spiral. In the early 1950s, in an attempt to end his drug addiction, Handy spent several years in Lexington, Kentucky undergoing substance abuse rehabilitation.

Handy's battles with substance abuse were a back-and-forth affair, but he managed to continue working. In the mid-1950s Handy recorded the only two albums that were released under his own name, both on Label "X", a subsidiary of RCA. *Handyland, U.S.A.* (1954), written over the course of several days, was intended as a "reflection of the standardized jazz of the day." The record consisted of simple arrangements (melody, solos, melody) of original melodic lines set to the chord progressions of standard songs (e.g., *There Will Never Be Another You*). In 1955, a follow-up record was commissioned, and resulted in *By George! Handy Of Course*. This record was far more compositionally adventurous than *Handyland, U.S.A.*, and involved unique reed doublings and the use of violin.

Also in 1955, Handy was asked by ABC-Paramount to conceive and produce an album for his close friend, saxophonist Zoot Sims. The album, *Zoot Sims Plays Four Altos*, which Handy produced, consisted entirely of Handy compositions. He recorded Sims and a trio (bass, and drums, and Handy himself on piano), transcribed Sims's performance, and then wrote three additional alto parts to harmonize and accompany the original Sims performance. Sims then overdubbed himself three times to complete the compositions. While now a common practice, at the time of this recording session overdubbing of this type was an innovative procedure.

At this point, Handy was in the final stage of his compositional career. His musical world and his personal life had shrunk to a small circle of friends and admirers, and essentially everything he composed from the mid-1950s until the mid-1960s was written for a very small but impressive group of musicians. Essentially, he wrote only for his own band, for Zoot Sims, or for the players involved with the New York Saxophone Quartet (NYSQ) whom he had known for many years. Shortly after *By George*, Handy began work on what was to become a four-movement work for flute and piano, the *Caine Flute Sonata*, written for Eddie Caine. He also embarked on a series of three saxophone quartets (*Saxophone Quartet*, Nos. 1, 2, and 3) and a saxophone suite (*New York Suite*, an eight-movement work), all composed for the NYSQ. This group's interest in extended, jazz-oriented, yet compositionally and technically rigorous music was particularly well suited for Handy's compositional aesthetic. Also, the members wanted to help Handy artistically and financially as best they could.

After the 1954-55 record projects, and besides the sporadic production of the works mentioned above, Handy largely disappeared from the music scene, apparently a victim of his personal habits and frustrations.

In late 1968, Handy was offered work that allowed him to extricate himself from the high-pressure world of the New York music business. He accepted a job as pianist in the house band at Grossinger's Resort, one of the "Borscht Belt" hotels in the Catskill Mountains. Handy and his wife took to the area, and eventually settled there. This type of work was a legitimate option for freelance musicians, and a number chose, as did Handy, to move to the area on a permanent basis, both for the steady work and the change in life style that it provided.

From the late 1970s through the mid-1990s, the work opportunities in the Catskills were diminishing, and the type of bands that Handy was involved with there were gradually being replaced by smaller ensembles that were catering to changing tastes. It was in this environment that Handy ended his musical career, and it contrasts starkly with 1945, when he wrote such important pieces as *Dalvatore Sally*.