

George Handy Biography

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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.

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, and was an important member of a small group of composers and arrangers, including Eddie Sauter, Pete Rugolo, Ralph Burns, Bob Graettinger, Gil Evans, and Gerry Mulligan, 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). 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 an 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.

While active, Handy's works were extremely influential, and compositions such as *Dalvatore Sally* and *The Bloos* are still recognized by aficionados as seminal works in the progressive jazz genre. Perhaps because his mercurial career brought him in and out of the musical limelight so rapidly, this contribution has largely been overlooked. Also, 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.

Classical composers, particularly Stravinsky and Bartók, were Handy's primary inspiration, and he drew from an unusually wide palette of sources and techniques, particularly for a jazz composer in the 1940s and '50s. Handy continued to mine these sources throughout the various stages of his career. In addition, several consistent elements in his 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. Though the overall quality of Handy's music is tonal, it is frequently difficult to identify a key or centric area.

Handy was born in Brownsville, Brooklyn (his neighborhood friends included such important musicians as Terry Gibbs, Al Cohn, Tiny Kahn, and Frank Socolow). His academic career included short, unsuccessful and unsatisfying studies at The Juilliard School and New York University, as well as private composition lessons with Aaron Copland. Handy's feelings about his studies with Copland are summed up in Handy's liner note comments for the record set, *The Jazz Scene*: "Studied privately with Aaron Copland for a while, which did neither of us any good."

Some of Handy's early important associations were with Raymond Scott, Jack Teagarden, Lionel Hampton, and Mugsy Spanier. His 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 was with the band as pianist, primary composer and arranger, and musical director, for two one-year stints (1944-46) separated by a six-month hiatus while concentrating on songwriting in Hollywood for Capitol Records and the Paramount music division.

The final period with Raeburn, from approximately June 1945 through July or August 1946, was the apex of George Handy's career, briefly thrusting him and the Raeburn band into the forefront of the jazz scene and the progressive compositional movement. Compositions such as *Dalvatore Sally*, *Hey Look, I'm Dancing*, *Key F (Keef)*, and *Yerxa*, as well as some experimental vocal arrangements, including *Forgetful*, *I Can't Believe That You're in Love With Me*, and *Temptation*, were written in a matter of weeks.

In 1946, Norman Granz commissioned Handy to write a composition for Granz's ambitious boxed record set, *The Jazz Scene*. Handy responded with *The Bloos*, a piece for jazz big band plus strings and woodwinds. This work displays Handy at the peak of his creativity, and is perhaps his most important work.

After leaving the Raeburn band, Handy had begun to experiment with heroin, and his life and career went into a downward spiral. Handy managed to continue working, however, and 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, consisted of simple arrangements (melody, solos, melody) of original melodic lines set to the chord progressions of standard songs. 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.

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 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 (Handy produced three albums for him), 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.

In 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. Handy went on to become a bandleader at the Granite Hotel, and it was in this environment that Handy ended his musical career.

Brief Notes on Three Important Works By George Handy

Dalvatore Sally (1945)

One of the best known and most important of George Handy's compositions for the Boyd Raeburn Orchestra was the band's theme song for the 1945-46 period, *Dalvatore Sally*. This work employs several compositional resources that were commonly found in classical works, but were unusual for big band writing of the time, including a unique approach to certain intervals often thought of as dissonant, the juxtaposition of unrelated chords, and non-functional triadic harmony. Another essential element is the piece's constantly shifting tempos and meters.

Dalvatore Sally is collage-like, with a quick-cutting aesthetic reminiscent of a cartoon soundtrack. Because of this, on first hearing, it seems purely episodic, yet recurring melodic and harmonic elements lift the work beyond a series of unrelated vignettes. In line with the cartoon-like character of the piece, there are numerous musical and sound effect references throughout the composition, and they take on a variety of shapes, such as clusters, dissonant sonorities, rhythms, tempos, and melodic lines. Along with programmatic content and a surrealist overtone, as well as references to popular and classical compositions, these elements combine to give the piece a wild, original quality. Handy was known to be prolific at this time, and the work has the sound of someone writing quickly, letting his ideas fly. Along with this looseness is a sense of humor and fun that provides a series of unexpected twists, turns, and juxtapositions.

Handy states that all of his works were programmatic, and in the case of *Dalvatore Sally* we have a written record of its program. Handy writes:

Dalvatore Sally is the story of a big city girl who becomes unhappy about the city and what it stands for. She envisions another type of existence for herself. However, money having value, and not to be found in dream sequences, she is brought back to reality, where she stays.

The introduction begins with alternating chromatic clusters between the trumpets and trombones at a medium-swing tempo. A general chaos and busyness is evoked throughout the introduction through meter changes and metrical ambiguities, polyrhythms, and alternating, swirling thirty-second notes. The next, slower section features ethereal, gradually shifting chordal dissonances in the brass and winds, creating a "surreal," harmonic world. The melancholy wail of a simple tenor saxophone melody occurs among layers of smoothly shifting chordal dissonances. A double-time tempo is then created by a saxophone ensemble, followed by a minor presentation of this melody with a Latin flavor. Handy wraps up the work with a mournful tenor sax solo, derived from the original sax melody, portraying Sally's (and, ultimately, Handy's) sadness regarding the harsh realities of life.

The Bloos (1946)

George Handy was on top of the jazz world in 1946, accumulating top awards and critical acclaim. This reputation was further solidified by his inclusion in one of the most

artistically ambitious recording projects ever undertaken in jazz, *The Jazz Scene*, produced by Norman Granz. The work composed for this project, *The Bloos*, turns out to be Handy's last major piece for full (or extended) big band. It can be seen as his crowning big band composition, as it manages to coalesce his interests in jazz and classical music into a very personal and unique musical statement. Though the work was recorded in 1946, tonight marks the world premiere performance of this important piece.

Handy wrote for an unusual twenty-seven piece ensemble, combining a fourteen-piece big band with strings, woodwinds, and percussion. He employed these instruments, with extremely varied timbral qualities, subtly and intelligently. Regarding the commission, Handy speaks of wanting to write "a composition dealing with what I felt were many of the blues feelings or forms, many of the essences of blues," and the result is an idiosyncratic, abstract, and deconstructed blues.

Like *Dalvatore Sally*, the piece is replete with themes, giving this five-minute work the feel of a longer composition. There are song-like sections contrasted with periods of episodic writing, and various instrumental sections (and combinations of sections) are highlighted; soloists, both improvised and non-improvised, are featured, and two cadenzas occur. The question of how Handy manages to pull all of these seemingly disparate ideas into a cohesive whole is one of the biggest mysteries surrounding his writing.

The *Bloos* begins with an oboe theme that quotes an oboe solo from Milhaud's *La création du monde* (1923). A screaming brass-led ensemble that is a faster and transposed version of the oboe melody (though it is nearly unrecognizable) leads back to a repeat of the theme. After a series of alternating melodic flurries, a lovely violin cadenza emerges, which then transitions to a lyrical trombone solo (composed, not improvised). A brief, rhythmically charged ensemble leads into two tenor sax blues choruses that seem oddly out of context, especially considering the title of the piece. The work concludes with a final repetition of the oboe theme and an unresolved final triad in the trombones that can be seen as a metaphor for Handy's unresolved, and not fully realized, career.

By George! (Handy of Course) (1955)

In 1954, after lengthy substance abuse treatment, Handy resumed his career, though he was no longer being hired for the big-name arranging work that he had previously received. Around this time, Handy completed two albums, *Handyland U.S.A.* (1954) and *By George! (Handy of Course)* (1955), the only albums made under his own name. Handy states that *Handyland, U.S.A.*, 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. In 1955, a follow-up record was commissioned, and resulted in *By George! (Handy Of Course)*.

While still in a mainstream style, the album incorporates Handy's experimental side and stretches jazz vocabulary. Handy continues to use some of the compositional resources seen in his work from the Raeburn period, such as shifting time signatures and a heavily layered, polyphonic texture, and his classical influences are clearly displayed.

The works are, at times, less harmonically adventurous, but the focus on through-composition (with little emphasis on improvisation) remains. A major difference between these charts and those of Handy's earlier work is that these newer compositions have a greater emphasis on melodic invention. They straddle a ground between songs and extended jazz composition, whereas the earlier instrumental works often focused more on complex harmonic and rhythmic textures.

By George! (Handy of Course) was recorded in Webster Hall in New York City over the course of two evenings. The ten-piece band was comprised of an all-star line-up of some of New York's busiest recording musicians. Just after the *By George!* album was recorded, Handy had a high-profile two-week engagement at *Birdland*, a top New York City nightclub, sharing a bill with the Count Basie Orchestra. This performance featured the compositions from *By George!*, with much of the recording ensemble intact. Tonight marks the first time that these compositions have been performed since that engagement.