



Blind Tom: A Musical Prodigy

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Introduction:

He was a renowned African American musical prodigy and was known by several names throughout his life and career. Some of the names he has been referred to include:

1. Thomas Grimes
2. Thomas "Blind Tom" Wiggins
3. Thomas Green Bethune
4. Thomas Bethune
5. Blind Tom
6. Thomas Greene Wiggins
7. Thomas Wiggins
8. Blind Tom Bethune

These various names are used in historical accounts, documentation, and references to his life, reflecting the different aspects of his identity and the contexts in which he lived as a child, slave, and performer from 1849 to 1908.

For this report I will refer to him as Tom.

While studying at Spelman College, Atlanta, GA in the mid-1990s, I came across Tom's name whilst researching Black American Musicians.

Later, I was surprised to find out that he had a connection with Brighton through the Dome and the Royal Pavilion, as he performed in both venues in 1867. This discovery immediately piqued my interest, prompting me to delve deeper into this long-forgotten piece of history.

I made the decision to find out more about Tom's visit to Brighton. Initially I thought it would be very straightforward research as but to my surprise this was not to be the case. Tom's life was made up of myths, half truths, and outrageous claims. Nothing was as it seemed.

I realised I had to separate the myth from the reality of Tom's life in order to get an understanding of this colossus of a human being who was more than just the sum of his disability and extraordinary musical skills.

The small project I thought I had undertaken (to tell a short story in art and spoken word about an African American musical prodigy who briefly visited Brighton) was suddenly something much bigger

because of what Tom represented as a Black disabled artist with a hidden history that has yet to be told.

I needed to get a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the challenges and injustices that Tom faced throughout his life. For me, it is not enough just to tell Tom's Brighton story, his WHOLE story needs to be told because only then will it help rectify the distortions and misrepresentations that have overtaken his story and reduced it to a parody of the person he actually is.

Furthermore, emphasizing the importance of Tom's mother, Charity Wiggins, is crucial in understanding the context of his life. Despite the oppressive circumstances of her own life, Charity played a vital role in ensuring her son's survival and well-being.

Research into her life and the sacrifices she made can help shed light on the strength and resilience of enslaved women like her, who often worked tirelessly to protect and support their children in the face of unimaginable adversity.

In addition to addressing the historical injustices of Tom's story and recognizing the resilience of Tom's family, studying Tom's life in depth will allow me to appreciate his extraordinary musical talent and the impact he had on other American musicians.

Tom was more than just a person with a disability to be pitied and admired for being "*so inspiring*." If anything, he was his music; it defined who he was, and his disabilities were simply a part of the musical score that composed his life.

Despite facing significant challenges and exploitation during his lifetime, Tom left a lasting impact on the world of music. His unique and innovative approach to the piano and his remarkable abilities have influenced and inspired numerous musicians and composers.

1. **Scott Joplin:** Joplin was heavily influenced by Tom's piano style. Joplin's compositions often reflect elements of Tom's innovative and virtuosic approach to the piano, and he is known to have admired Tom's music and playing style.

2. **George Gershwin:** Gershwin was known for his blend of classical and jazz music and was influenced by Tom's work. Gershwin's compositions, including "*Rhapsody in Blue*," show the influence of the syncopated rhythms and expressive playing style that characterised Blind Tom's performances.

3. **Thelonious Monk:** Monk was influenced by Tom's unorthodox approach to the piano. Monk's use of dissonance, angular melodies, and rhythmic complexity may have been influenced by the unconventional and boundary-pushing aspects of Tom's music.

4. **Franz Liszt:** Liszt is believed to have been influenced by Tom's performances. Liszt, known for his virtuosic piano compositions and performances, may have been inspired by Tom's technical prowess and innovative interpretations of music.

5. **Sergei Rachmaninoff:** Rachmaninoff is known for his lush, romantic compositions and virtuosic piano performances, and he may have been influenced by Tom's innovative approach to the piano and his emotive playing style.

6. **Jelly Roll Morton:** Morton was influenced by the syncopated rhythms and improvisational aspects of Tom's playing. Morton's contributions to early jazz reflect elements of the musical techniques that made Tom's performances distinctive.

7. **Duke Ellington:** Ellington drew inspiration from a wide range of musical styles, and it is likely that he was influenced by Tom's contributions to American music. Ellington's innovative compositions and arrangements may have been informed by the boundary-pushing aspects of Tom's musical legacy.

8. **Art Tatum:** Art Tatum is another musician who may have been influenced by Tom's inventive approach to the piano. Tatum's virtuosic playing and harmonic innovation may reflect elements of Tom's influence.

9. **Herbie Hancock:** Hancock is known for his pioneering work in jazz fusion and his innovative approach to improvisation, and he may have drawn inspiration from Tom's unconventional and boundary-pushing musical style.

10. **Fats Waller:** Waller is believed to have been influenced by Tom's piano technique and performance style. Waller's lively and charismatic piano playing may have been shaped, in part, by elements of Tom's legacy.

11. **Stevie Wonder:** Stevie Wonder is known for his groundbreaking contributions to popular music, and he may have been influenced by Blind Tom's inventive and emotive approach to music. Wonder's ability to blend diverse musical genres and incorporate innovative techniques could reflect elements of Tom's influence.

12. **Oscar Peterson:** Peterson a musician celebrated for his dazzling technical proficiency and improvisational skill, may have drawn inspiration from Blind Tom's unconventional and virtuosic piano playing. Peterson's dynamic and expressive performances may have been influenced by aspects of Tom's musical compositions.

Tom's early life, his time as a performer and his days as the last American Slave

Here are some **FACTS** about Bethune and Tom that **CAN BE CONFIRMED:**

- Bethune was a lawyer and newspaper editor.
- He established a law office in Columbus.
- He served as a lieutenant during the Creek War of 1832.
- He had a successful tenure as an editor of the 'Columbus Times' during the 1840s.
- He purchased slaves from an estate in Harris County in 1850, including a blind, autistic child named Thomas Grimes.
- Tom was intellectually challenged, an autistic savant, possibly had what we now know is Prader-Willi syndrome and was more than likely born with cataracts that caused his blindness.
- His mother Charity was 48 years old when she gave birth to Tom; she was a house slave for a one Wiley Jones, and was married to a field hand, Domingo (Mingo) Wiggins.
- Charity had given birth between 12 and 21 children over the years and when Tom was born, he was one of three or four of her offspring still living with her on the plantation.
- Tom's mother who worked in the Bethune household, was permitted to bring Tom with her to work in the main house.
- Tom displayed exceptional musical talent from a young age. He could mimic the sounds of nature and play complex musical pieces after hearing them just once. He was often called a "*human mockingbird*."
- Tom began performing publicly at a very young age and quickly gained fame for his remarkable musical abilities. He was often billed as "*Blind Tom, the Eighth Wonder of the World*."

- Tom soon became known for his remarkable ability to compose and improvise music on the spot. He could effortlessly create complex compositions as well as complex variations on popular tunes. Eg Battle of Manassas.
- Tom was removed from his mother's care around the age of 6/7 and embarked on concert tours across the United States and eventually into Europe.
- Bethune hired out Tom to a concert promoter for \$15,000.
- Tom DID receive formal musical training, despite claims that everything he played was done by hearing a musical score only once.
- Tom played for President James Buchanan at the White House in 1860.
- Tom made the Bethune family about \$24.5 million in today's currency, none of it that Tom or his family ever saw.
- After the Civil War, Bethune moved his family to a 420-acre estate paid for with the money Tom made.
- Tom did go to Europe to perform, he also performed in Canada. Countries in Europe that Tom performed in, England, Scotland and France
- In England he performed at Crystal Palace in London, and from newspaper reports he also performed in venues in Bradford, Birmingham, Derby, Lancaster, Leicester, Newcastle, Manchester, Huddersfield, Sheffield, Isle of Wight and many others.
- In France he performed at the Salle Hertz in Paris.

FACTS THAT ARE ANECDOTAL OR HAVE BEEN REPORTED IN NEWSPAPERS OF THE TIME, SOME OF WHICH ARE INACCURATE/FALSE

- Charity knew her son would be considered a burden by her first owner Wiley Jones. She turned to Jones daughter Valerie for support, begging the girl to name her son which she did, calling him "Tom Grimes".
- Valerie saved Tom from death as she grew fond of the baby she had named and apparently intervened on his behalf against her father's wishes to starve the child of food.
- Rescue for Tom came in the guise of James Neil Bethune, a prominent Southern slave owner who treated his slaves somewhat better than Jones and who at the pleading of the Wiggins family purchased the whole family from Jones who was in dire straits due to having to pay death duties on his family estate.
- One of Bethune's daughters, Mary, discovered Tom's musical ability.
- Bethune initially likened Tom's intelligence to that of the family dog and began teaching him to respond to animal commands such as "sit" and "stand."
- The Bethune children were all musically inclined and their father purchased them a piano. As they practiced their scales, young Tom listened intently. When the small child was eventually granted access to the keyboard, Tom astounded everyone with his ability to accurately reproduce chord sequences from memory.
- The family "pet" suddenly had value, and Bethune had no qualms about making money from what was his property.
- Tom is reported to have played for Queen Victoria in Buckingham Palace but there are no records of this, only anecdotal stories.
- Tom is also reported to have played before President Abraham Lincoln and General Ulysses S. Grant but there is no historical documental evidence for this so far.

Challenges, Exploitation, and Ridicule:

Tom was presented as a curiosity and treated primarily as a source of entertainment rather than the accomplished artist he truly was, denying him the agency and recognition he deserved during his lifetime.

Instead of acknowledging him as a musician in his own right, he was often relegated to the status of a mere curiosity or a marvel of nature, with his exceptional talents being attributed to the spirit world, rather than them being his own.

Tom's remarkable abilities brought great wealth to his owners and guardians, yet he and his family never received the financial benefits they rightfully deserved. His mother Charity once told a reporter she "*received \$15...*" from the Bethune family but all she wanted was her son back, something she never gave up fighting for.

Charity Wiggins died in 1902, her husband Mingo had died 10 years previously, she lived to be nearly 100 years old, a testament to her determination to one day be reunited with her beloved boy. Sadly this never happened.

Legacy and Impact:

Tom's legacy has extended far beyond his own lifetime. Through his music, he inadvertently challenged societal perceptions of disability and race, proving that talent and genius has no boundaries. His compositions, which ranged from classical to popular tunes, showcased his versatility and creativity.

Conclusion:

Despite the exploitation he endured, Tom's legacy survives but not in the way one would expect.

His story must serve as a reminder that hate, ignorance and prejudice cannot sever the music within your soul.

Tom's disabilities heightened his senses, so he was able to soar above the mundane, the stupid, the ignorant, and leave a lasting legacy that reverberated through history and time. Tom's story raises important questions about exploitation, disability rights, and racial inequality, questions that still need addressing today.

Ideas for future work on Blind Tom

- i. Linking in with Brighton Museum to put on a small temporary exhibition on Tom's life and his links to the Dome
- ii. A workshop for local people and groups to come together to learn about Tom and come up with a event for Black History Month
- iii. Tell Charity Wiggins story for International Women's day
- iv. Creating a short film (5-10 mins) about Tom and his time at the dome
- v. Showcasing Tom's musical repertoire though a concert at the Dome
- vi. A play about Tom's life, using his music to tell his story
- vii. Linking in with a local university to research Tom's life through the lens of disability/music and work toward a thesis/book for publication
- viii. An art exhibition based on Tom's life/music where young people are brought to the Dome and told Tom's story and then create their own pieces of artwork about Tom that can be exhibited in the founders room

These were just a few ideas I have with regard to future work