

In shabby Cleveland flat, Cow Cow dreams of days when all America sang his tunes



# Cow Cow Davenport

Forgotten composer of yesterday's hit songs lives in poverty in Cleveland slum

BY FRANK HARRIOTT

THE NAME of Charles "Cow Cow" Davenport is known to few Americans. Although they have sung his tunes and heard his music hundreds of times on the radio and in night spots, most people have allowed his name to pass into oblivion with flagpole sitting, two chickens in every pot and bathtub gin.

To those who do remember him, the name brings back memories of the jazz-happy 20's, rent parties and the six-table cellar cabarets called speakeasies.

Cow Cow, as he prefers to be called, was a headliner in vaudeville's golden years. A blues singer, pianist and composer, he earned thousands of dollars, delighted millions of people with compositions like *Mama Don't Allow No Piano Playing Here* and *I'll Be Glad When You're Dead You Rascal You*. To all observers, his success as a musician was permanently assured.

But Cow Cow, whose most recent claim to fame is that he wrote the late song hit *Cow Cow Boogie*, today lives in obscurity in one of Cleveland's worst slum tenements. His apartment, a drafty three rooms, is in a sagging frame building just off a garbage-littered alley. There, surrounded by faded photographs and mementos of his days of glory, he sits and broods about his past. Over a pot-bellied stove which in winter barely heats one room, he reminisces dolefully about the glories of yesterday.

But Cow Cow, now a portly silver-haired, bronze-skinned man of 56, blames his plight on his foolishness in years ago signing away the rights to some of his most famous tunes. "In those days none of us had any idea the things we wrote could make big money," he says. "We just sold them for what we could get. Sometimes it was as little as \$25."

Cow Cow now is protected by membership in the American Society of Composers and Musicians, but royalties from music on which he still holds claim come to under \$50 a month. He gets no royalties for *Cow Cow Boogie*—a terrific money-maker—which he sold outright to the Leeds Music Co. in 1942 for \$500. "They even took my name off the sheet music," he adds.

Now, to earn extra money, Cow Cow peddles ices in summer and Kewpie dolls in winter. "Ain't these things awful?" he will ask, holding up a stick topped by the doll's head and torso. "I buy them for 20 cents apiece, attach crepe paper streamers to the waist, then sell them for half a dollar in front of night clubs. If I'm lucky, I can make two or three dollars a night."

Sometimes too, Cow Cow can pick up a few dollars playing and singing in neighborhood cabarets, but it never amounts to more than that. "I try not to get too discouraged," he says, a tremor in his husky voice. "I keep trying to remember misfortune once put me on the road to fame."

The misfortune, Cow Cow says, was that his wife, Helen Rivers, a blues singer-pianist, walked out on him in 1922 after a year of marriage. "I was so blue I commenced to get drunk," he says. "I went from honky tonk to honky tonk drinking everything I could lay my hands on. When I walked out on the stage that night, I could hardly stand up straight. But I had sense enough to pretend like it was part of the act. I made up some words right there on the spot and began to sing my sadness . . ."

The sadness, which he called *Cow Cow Blues*, was the story of

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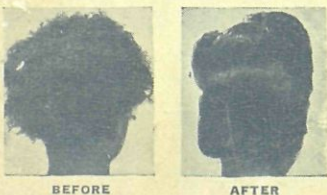


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## COW COW DAVENPORT *Continued*

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"Been up north, baby, and I done learned a new Sally Long."  
"Sally Long me, daddy, and Eagle Rock me, too,  
"Cause can't nobody rock me like Poppa Cow Cow do."*

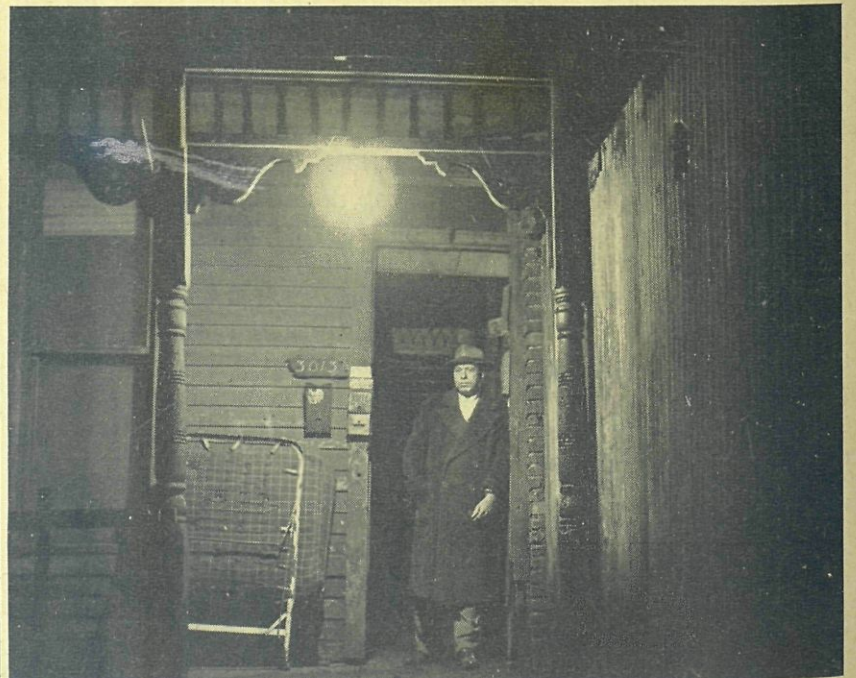
"Folks went wild over it," Cow Cow says. "Everywhere I went they asked to hear it. And everybody started calling me Poppa Cow Cow. It made me so popular I was soon in the \$100 a week class—all because Helen took a powder on me." Cow Cow pauses and shakes his head. "It's dumb me thinking about another misfortune putting me back on top. I can't wait for fate to help me out. A lot of folks know I have plenty tunes in me yet. And because my voice ain't so good any more, they keep telling me I should write material for newcomers. That's what I'm trying to do now. I've got my name to live up to. It ain't Cow Cow for nothing."

Cow Cow had been calling himself by that name ever since he was a boy in Anniston, Alabama, where he used to like to watch railroad switchmen jumping on and off the fan-shaped front section of locomotives called the cow catcher. He wanted so much to be like these switchmen, he began calling himself Cow Cow.

"I couldn't read music in those days," he says, "but I could play things by ear. By the time I was eight I was pounding out things like the *Greasy Mitt*, a ragtime piece everybody was cutting a little step with then. 'I don't want all them rags played in here,' my Pa would say. 'Play all the reels you want, but no rags.' Pa had gotten religion, you see. And to his way of thinking religion didn't allow no ragging on the piano."

But Cow Cow was determined to play, and a number of severe beatings from his father failed to stop him. "When I was sixteen years old," he recalls, "Pa sent me to Selma University, a place where they turned out practically all the preachers in Alabama. That's what Pa wanted me to be—a preacher. He told the school people about me and the piano and they promised him they wouldn't let me get near one. But I fixed 'em. I used to stand in front of theatres and pick up new tunes by ear."

Cow Cow was at Selma University one year. Then his piano got him into trouble. "One night they needed somebody to play piano for the grand march at a school social," he says. "They asked me 'cause no one else could play. Well, I started pounding



Tenement house where Cow Cow lives will soon be razed to make way for housing project. Cow Cow, who pays \$20 a month for three room apartment, has to stuff paper about windows and doors in winter to keep cold out.





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Playing for customers at Carioca Club, a Cleveland cabaret, Cow Cow picks up a few dollars. He gets inspiration for songs by listening to customers, then weaving their words into blues. Cow Cow has written total of 114 recorded songs.

## COW COW DAVENPORT Continued

out *Grand Army of the Republic*. The kids was marching good enough, but I just couldn't keep on playing that stuff. So I commenced to rag it. The girls got so frisky they couldn't march right. That made the school people mad and I got suspended."

Cow Cow returned to Anniston, but did not remain there long "because everybody was hard on me about school." He ran away to Atlanta, Georgia, and began playing in honky tonks and barrel houses in the Black Bottom district.

"A barrel house was the back room of a bar," he says. "They stored beer barrels there, and it was the only place ladies could drink. They'd come there to get tins of beer, or pick up treats from the boys at the bar. Most barrel houses had a broken-down piano in them, and I was able to make a few pennies pounding out stuff for the ladies and their boy friends."

### Tells Of Job In Brothel

COW COW admits that during this period he also worked in a brothel. "The madam liked the way I played," he says, laughing. "She gave me a brown silk shirt to wear 'cause she said I had to look as good as the girls, and paid me four dollars a week, room and board. I used to sit in the ballroom and play. The girls would sit around in fancy chairs wearing nothing but kimonos. They was all complexions—looked just like a flower garden they did. The customers would come in and dance the girls. When they found one they liked, they took her upstairs. I never did no fooling with the girls, though. I was scared of sporting women."

When Cow Cow was twenty-three he got his first job in vaudeville. "It was in an exclusively colored house in Augusta, Georgia," he says. "They had a silent movie, a comedy act, a couple of comic dancers named Airship and Airship, Bessie Smith and Gertrude Williams to sing blues and jazz. Me and Bessie stayed in the same rooming house back of the theatre. Bessie was a cute little brown skin gal then, a little heavy built, but real friendly and sweet. That was years before she made a big name for herself."

Shortly after his marriage to Helen Rivers went on the rocks, Cow Cow formed a team with a new singer, Dora Carr. "Didn't think I'd ever team up with a woman again," he says. "Didn't trust them 'cause Helen never did say why she quit me. But Dora pestered me so much, I couldn't help myself. Gave me fancy pajamas and once put an envelope with \$12 in it under my pillow. I gave in, and soon we was touring the circuits together."

In 1923 an O-Keh record talent scout brought Cow Cow and Dora to New York for their first recording date. "We moved into the Woodside, the swellest hotel in Harlem. Harlem was big stuff then. The speakeasies and gin mills was doing rush business,

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**COW COW DAVENPORT** *Continued*

and Marcus Garvey was raising hell with his Back-to-Africa movement. I wrote some back-to-Africa lyrics for him and he paid me \$50 apiece for them."

Cow Cow's records with Dora Carr made him famous, and in the years following he earned as much as \$15,000 annually for vaudeville appearances, record and song royalties. "That was a big time salary then, and I got wise to myself and began saving money. Only thing to stop me was women. But I cut them out and soon I had \$18,000 in the bank."

In 1929, when talking pictures began to put the skids on vaudeville, Cow Cow got himself a job composing for the Vocalion Record Co. in Chicago. His salary was \$85 a week, and he considered it very adequate. "In vaudeville, you never did have too much after you paid traveling expenses and everything.

"Well, I got myself a seven-room apartment on Wabash and 35th and had a gal run it for me. I'd give her some money and she'd open the place for weekly chitterling suppers where she sold bad hootch. It was depression times then, and everybody was doing stuff like that. It was the only way my gal could earn pin money."

**Goes Into Vaudeville Again**

**COW COW** thought himself content, but soon he yearned for his vaudeville days again. "Show people I knew kept telling me things was good down south. Talking pictures hadn't caught on there yet. Why didn't I try getting some of the good money floating around down there? Well, I thought and thought and one day I took my \$18,000 out of the bank and went into show business for myself."

Cow Cow bought a bus, had COW COW'S CHICAGO STEPPERS painted on its sides, hired musicians, acrobats, comedians, and show girls. "I felt like a millionaire. Bought brand new costumes and drops. Spent almost \$1000 helping the people I hired get their essentials out of hock. Kansas City was our first stop. People crowded around the bus when we drove up to the theatre just to eye the pretty girls I had. We did okay there, but things didn't stay good for long. It turned out the south was bad as the north when it came to vaudeville.

"Things got so bad I started borrowing money on the bus—a hundred here and there to give my performers so they could buy cigarette, half soles, stockings and things like that.

Finally Cow Cow lost his bus to creditors and in 1935 he and his troupe were stranded at Tallahassee, Florida. Bitter because of his failure, Cow Cow decided to give up show business. He came to Cleveland in 1937 to live with a sister. He went to work

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for the WPA digging ditches, and except for a few attempts by jazz enthusiasts to revive interest in him, he has been out of the limelight ever since. Once he thought he might crack the New York night clubs and went to Gotham for a try. But all he could get was a job as a men's room attendant.

**Gets Encouragement From Youngsters**

**W**HEN I think of the hard times I went through," he goes on, "I want to do my best to encourage kids to get ahead. Kids in the neighborhood hear me playing piano and come around to watch. A lot of them have talent, and I help them along with singing lessons.

But although he is virtually unknown, Cow Cow finds some comfort in the fact that the public has changed its attitude toward entertainers. "In my day nice people looked down on show folks," he says, "and it put a chip on their shoulders. Especially show girls. They'd dress to kill—like in a defiance.

"Nowadays things is different. I get letters from people in far-away places like Sweden asking about my life and when I made certain records. All kinds of folk drop in here to ask me the same kind of questions.

Cow Cow lives alone with a brown and white dog named Teddy. Sometimes, when he has a visitor, he will pat the dog on the head and tell about its background. "Teddy is part collie and part shepherd," he will say. "His daddy leads a blind man, and Teddy is waiting for me to get blind so he can lead me, too. Ain't you, Teddy?"

Teddy will look up at Cow Cow and wag his tail. "You should've started leading me a long time ago," Cow Cow will say. "I been blind far back as I can remember. The gift of music is all right, but it didn't turn out good for me. I should've had someone like you leading me at the start. Then maybe things would've turned out different.

"I know a lot of times I think maybe it's my fault I'm living this life. I figure if I had become a brick mason, I'd still be laying them because bricks don't go out of style.

"But then I tell myself I shouldn't think that way. As long as a few people are interested in me, some good will come of it. Besides, when I go to sleep at night I dream about nothing but music. I have fine dreams about instruments playing and people dancing and laughing. Seems to me if I dream that much about my work, I can't be much good for anything else."



Rehearsing at the battered piano he found eight years ago in a nearby alley, Cow Cow hopes to make new career for himself composing material for theatrical newcomers. He feels he will never again be a top entertainer.

*what a*  
**SCOTCH!**

\* WHITE HORSE of course!

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