



BLIND TOM PLAYS FOR CONFEDERATE TROOPS, 1863

The slave's hands dance free, unfettered, flying
across ivory, feet stomping toward
a crescendo that fills the forest pine,
reminding the Rebs what they're fighting for—
black, captive labor. Tom, slick with sweat, shows
a new trick: Back turned to his piano,
he leans like a runner about to throw
himself to freedom through forest bramble—
until he spreads his hands behind him. He
hitches fingertips to keys, hauls Dixie
slowly out of the battered upright's teeth
like a work song dragged across cotton fields,
like a plow, weighted and dirty, ringing
with a slaver's song at master's bidding.

GENERAL JAMES BETHUNE AND JOHN BETHUNE INTRODUCE BLIND TOM

Here he is, the Amazing Blind Tom . . .

*he's pitched in darkness, exalted through sound he's mastered sharp and flat of piano:
a slave whose head is a trunk full of song
peeling from each deft fingertip. We've found a musical freak, a brown tornado,
a maestro who conjures three tunes at once—
a storm that brings lightning, thunder and rain a far cry from the fields his kin slaved, he's
like a one man band. This chattel's become
filled with the light of music. His brain's besotted with syncopation. He seems
unlocked by 88 keys to sing out
jingling with joy, the way an angel gets blessed in the thrall of some idiot god
raptured into tongues. Tom is, beyond doubt,
winged past sorrow, each note pulled from his head sprung from some holy, dark place that got
burnished by fate and delivered by songs
We present to you Mr. Wiggins—O' Blind Tom . . .*

WHAT MARKED TOM?

Did a slave song at a master's bidding
mark Tom while asleep in Charity's womb?
The whole plantation would be called to sing
and dance in Master Epps' large parlor room—
after work sprung from dawn and kept past dusk,
after children auctioned to parts unknown,
after funerals and whippings. Thus
was the whim of the patriarch. No groans
allowed, just high steppin' celebration,
grins all around, gritted or sincere.
Charity threw feet, hips, arms into motion
to please the tyrant piano. Was it here
Tom learned how music can prove the master?
While he spun in a womb of slavish laughter?

MARK TWAIN V. BLIND TOM

Some archangel,	<i>I'm sent from above—</i>
cast out of upper Heaven	<i>like rain on blue prayers.</i>
like another Satan,	<i>blessed with Gabriel's lost notes, I</i>
inhabits this coarse casket;	<i>can see up to God's throne, yes,</i>
and he comforts himself	<i>while he plays this soul</i>
and makes his prison	<i>of flesh free- makes me</i>
beautiful with	<i>the music of piano, the</i>
thoughts and	<i>breath and</i>
dreams and	<i>burn in the</i>
memories of	<i>stormcloud's roar from</i>
another time	<i>when sound called up,</i>
and another existence	<i>first made me whole.</i>
that fire	<i>sounds like love.</i>
this dull clod	<i>weighted in my chest</i>
with impulses and inspirations	<i>—it finds freedom after</i>
it no more comprehends	<i>hurt. I hear Earth's tremble harsher</i>
than does the stupid worm	<i>—better than the soil itself. When</i>
the stirring of the spirit within	<i>land and tree sing to me, I hear</i>
her	<i>notes</i>
of the	<i>wildly</i>
gorgeous captive	<i>blooming inside—a spirit</i>
whose wings she	<i>shadows across my face,</i>
fetters	<i>breaking free</i>
and	<i>unloosed. I play the wind</i>
whose flight she stays	<i>in my blood.</i>

Left column is quoted from Mark Twain's Special Letters to the *San Francisco Alta California* August 1, 1869.