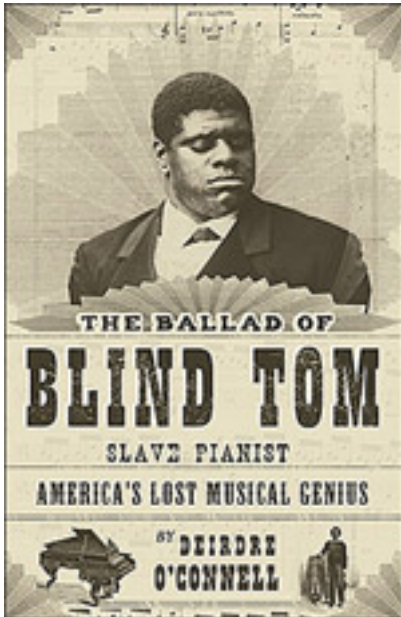


Book review: “The Ballad of Blind Tom” by Deirdre O’Connell

Written by Terri Schlichenmeyer



Have you ever had a brainworm?

It sounds like something you'd see a doctor for, but it's benign. A brainworm is a song you just cannot get out of your head.

Brainworms arrive when you least expect them, usually when you're trying to sleep. You rarely remember how you got them and you can't easily get rid of them. They must fade on their own.

Now imagine recalling every song, every sound, every word you've ever heard in your life. In the new book “The Ballad of Blind Tom” by Deirdre O’Connell you’ll read about a prodigy who was wildly famous over a hundred years ago, but is all but unknown now.

When the slave Charity, known as a “good breeder”, had her baby (some say her twenty-first

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child), she saw that the infant was different. His eyes were white, sightless, and she knew it could signal his death. Instead, knowing it might save him, she let her master’s daughter name the child. The young woman called the baby “Tom”.

Eight months later, Charity and her family were sold to an outspoken man who appeared to have wanted to keep them together. The purchase was the “deal of a lifetime”, for as Tom grew, he developed a unique talent: he could repeat – and recall, years later - any sound he heard with uncanny precision.

On a pre-Civil War farm, this was a useless talent but Tom’s abilities soon became valuable. Mimicking the master’s children, the boy discovered piano. At first, his noises were just that – jarring and tuneless. But his master, seeing opportunity, gave Tom unlimited access to the instrument. By the time he was five years old, Tom was performing and composing.

Although he was a pawn during the Civil War and was tricked into agreeing with the basic idea of slavery, Tom’s fame grew. He was invited to play in the White House and before the Queen of England. He met Mark Twain and was, O’Connell says, “a household name for close to half a century...”

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Today, though, you rarely hear of Tom except for the occasional controversy (more than one person claimed to be the “real” Blind Tom) and the name on two graves, both purporting to hold his bones.

I had mixed feelings about this book.

On one hand, this is a story that needed to be told. Tom’s tale is an amazing one, especially when one considers, as author Deirdre O’Connell points out, that records of disabled-at-birth slaves are rare, which may indicate that few such slaves reached adulthood. That Tom’s mother found ways to keep him from being killed is a testament to a mother’s wily love.

On the other hand, O’Connell can be melodramatic at times, fiction of which detracts from this non-fiction story. I could have used less poetic drama and more factual liveliness.

Still, if you’re an avid reader of African American history or a student of early American entertainment, you’ll want this book. For you, “The Ballad of Blind Tom” is one to wrap your brain around.

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