



Merit, Not Sympathy, Wins

John William “Blind” Boone Symposium

[Registration Form](#)

Friday, September 30, 2022 (Columbia)

Saturday, October 1, 2022 (Warrensburg)

Sunday, October 2, 2022 (Jefferson City)



We welcome you to Central Missouri, where John William “Blind” Boone lived and worked. The following program details the exciting lineup of presenters and performers ready to share the life and career of Boone as well as interesting related topics. Our symposium is made possible through collaboration between The John William Boone Heritage Foundation, The Boone County History and Culture Center, The Budds Center for American Music Studies at the University of Missouri-Columbia, Lincoln University of Missouri, University of Central Missouri, Reginald Robinson, and Dr. Jolie Rocke.



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Day 1, Friday, September 30, 2022 (Columbia, MO)

8:00am- Registration Opens (Second Baptist Church, Fellowship Hall) Coffee and bagels provided

8:45am- Welcoming Remarks

Jolie Rocke and Programming Committee

9:00am- Watch the “J.W. Boone” Film (Second Baptist Sanctuary?)

9:30am- Walk to J.W. Boone Home

Tour of home/African American Legacy Trail with Greg Olson

11:00am- Depart for Boone County History and Culture Center (BCHCC)

11:30am- Tour of BCHCC and Cabins with Chris Campbell

12:30pm- Lunch (provided in BCHCC Gallery) and Break

1:30-2:00pm- Panel Discussion: *Boone and the Meaning of Ragtime* (BCHCC, Gallery) Jolie Rocke, Moderator

2:10-2:40pm Reginald Robinson (Piano), “Musings on Boone’s Output”

2:50-3:20pm- Maya Gibson (University of Missouri), “Contending with the Ghosts of Ragtime”

Why do today’s Black audiences fail to appreciate ragtime’s deeply embedded Black musical roots? Answers are both complex and convoluted. A more fitting question may be, What can be done to win Black audiences back? This paper interrogates ragtime’s narrative by contending with its many ghosts: particularly those of race, gender, performance practice, and reception, all of which work to determine cultural value within the Black community. Ironically, I sense a turning tide with pop megastars like Beyoncé and Lizzo leading the way, two Black women who champion an unapologetic celebration of HBCU Marching Band culture. Their audacity not only whets a public appetite for marching band music, it also indirectly shapes the public’s ears, potentially opening up space for ragtime. Could gestures like theirs shift ragtime’s pejorative narrative in the hearts and minds of Black people? Could they foment a Black “Homecoming” for Black audiences and ragtime? I argue that yes, they could.

3:30pm- Depart BCHCC for Dinner Break in Downtown Columbia

(Dinner suggestions near Mizzou Fine Arts Building: [Shakespeare's Pizza](#), [Heidelberg](#))

6:30pm- Blind Boone Highsteppers pre-concert performance (Mizzou Fine Arts Building)

7:00pm- *The Vocal Music of John William “Blind” Boone: Putting the Cookies on the Lower Shelf.*

(Mizzou Fine Arts Building- Whitmore Hall – Free Open To The Public)

A concert presenting the vocal compositions of Boone, traditional negro spirituals, and the original works of Reginald Robinson. Featuring Jolie Rocke (soprano) and Reginald Robinson (piano)

9:00pm - DEPART FOR WARRENSBURG (Transportation for registrants provided.)

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Day 2, Saturday, October 1, 2022 (Warrensburg, MO)

8:00am- Registration opens (University of Central Missouri, Utt Lobby) Coffee and bagels provided.
([UCM campus map and parking suggestions.](#))

9:00-9:40am- The Merit of John William “Blind” Boone (Hart Recital Hall and also with [Livestream Access](#))

Mike Shaw, Johnson County Historical Society

This presentation considers two critical points in Boone’s career: his formal piano training in Iowa from instructor Marjorie Sampson, and the inception of the Blind Boone Concert Company with manager John Lange, which helped the business become financially solvent. The paper argues that Boone’s financial successes afforded him the freedom to create his unique style of early ragtime, a hybrid compositional soundscape of tunes he heard as a child mixed with the established canon of Western European art works.

[Boone in the News](#) (Hart Recital Hall and also with [Livestream Access](#)) Megan Murph, moderator

9:50-10:20am Marc Rice (Truman State University), “The Newspaper Coverage of Blind Boone in the Midwest: What the White and African American Presses Reveal”

The life and career of JW “Blind” Boone was covered extensively by both the White and African American newspapers of the Midwest with entries indicating his company’s travel itinerary, his repertory, and the people involved with his concerts, both on and off the stage. From this material we can gain insight into how and where he and his company traveled, how his tours were organized, how his repertory developed, and how Midwestern music and culture was understood during his career. By examining the Black newspapers, we can see his connection with the African Americans who migrate from the South to the Midwest during this period. The White newspapers, which covered his performances for White audiences, mostly write of him in terms of respect for his talent and the music he provided. This study of Boone in the press illustrates the development of his career, and the peaks and valleys of the Blind Boone Concert Company. The newspapers reveal the distinct geographic and economic challenges that he and his company faced, and thus enhance our understanding of the world of touring musicians during this period.

10:30-11:00am- Allison Robbins (University of Central Missouri),
“Blind Boone in the Classroom: Teaching Music History with Digitized Newspaper Collections”

The accessibility of digitized historical newspaper collections make undergraduate research projects possible in a way that was unimaginable in past decades. In this presentation, Allison Robbins will provide an overview of her experiments using digitized newspaper collections in classroom teaching. Students from her current music history class will explain how, in preparation for this symposium, they used newspaper articles published across the country to research the life, music, and career Blind Boone.

[Boone and Disability](#) (Hart Recital Hall and also with [Livestream Access](#)) Allison Robbins, moderator

11:10-11:40am Patrice Fortiori (Independent Scholar), “The Eyes of a Genius: A Comprehensive Review of Enucleation in the Diagnosis & Treatment of Brain Disorders the 19th Century: The Case of John William “Blind” Boone”

In 1864, a six month old African-American boy received a surgery that removed his structurally and optically healthy eyes. This surgical enucleation was ordered as a treatment for a variety of physiological and medical disorders. This six month old boy healed and became the musical genius John William “Blind” Boone. This presentation answers the questions of why and how John William “Blind” Boone lost his sight and provides a survey of the diagnosis and treatments of medical and health disorders where removal of the eyes is the best recommended treatment and how that could affect other brain function and abilities.

11:50-12:20 Libby Roberts (University of Western Ontario), “Merit, not Genius: The Problem of Romanticized Disabilities and the Genius of Blind Boone”

Pianist and composer John William Boone (1864–1927) has been historically characterized by his disability, encapsulated in his stage name, “Blind Boone.” Nineteenth-century mainstream society heralded him as a “genius,” appearing to overlook typical views of Black, disabled musicians as “freaks.” Even today, contemporary critics still consider Boone’s musical feats as the work of a “genius.” While seemingly complimentary I propose that the “genius” stereotype carries dehumanizing subtexts. Blind musicians like John Boone have challenged these normative biases, and in learning how his disability enabled a unique fluency in music, his achievements can be considered in an inclusive way. I draw on scholarship in disabilities studies, cognitive psychology, and phenomenology to first explain how the “genius” stereotype emerged from Western culture’s fixation on sight and individuality as moral virtues. I then explore three elements common to Boone’s concerts: his virtuosic repertoire, his imitations of other instruments and non-musical sounds, and, finally, his ability to play back music he had only heard once. I conclude that deconstructing the “genius” of John Boone allows his accomplishments, not his disability, to become the centerpiece of his career.

12:30-2:00pm Lunch Break

Nearby restaurants in downtown Warrensburg: [Old Barney’s](#), [Fitter’s](#), [Heroes](#), [Meyer’s Market](#), [Old Drum Coffeehouse](#), [Taqueria Habana](#), [La Sous Terre](#), and [Muddy Creek BBQ](#).

2:00-4:00pm Blind Boone’s Warrensburg Experience Jon Taylor (University of Central Missouri)

Walking tour guided by Jon Taylor (Professor of History), which will visit places in Warrensburg related to Boone’s life, including stops at Blind Boone Park and the Johnson County Historical Society. Tour begins in downtown Warrensburg at the Old Drum statue near the Johnson County Courthouse. (Transportation, snacks, and entry fees to JCHS provided for registrants.)

4:30-5:30pm UCM Boone Scholarship Reception (Hart Recital Hall and Utt Lobby also with [Livestream Access](#))

UCM Music will celebrate the endowment of a scholarship in honor of John William “Blind” Boone. UCM music students will perform, followed by a reception hosted by UCM Provost Phil Bridgmon and the UCM Alumni Foundation

5:30-7:00pm Dinner Break ([Warrensburg restaurant suggestions](#))

7:00pm- *The Vocal Music of John William “Blind” Boone: Putting the Cookies on the Lower Shelf.*

(Hart Recital Hall at University of Central Missouri, Warrensburg and also with [Livestream Access](#))

A concert presenting the vocal compositions of Boone, traditional negro spirituals, and the original works of Reginald Robinson. Featuring Jolie Rocke (soprano) and Reginald Robinson (piano)

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Day 3, Sunday, October 2, 2022 (Lincoln University of Jefferson City, MO)

8:00-9:45am Depart/Warrensburg, MO (breakfast at hotel)

10:00am Registration (Pawley Theater Lobby)

Boone and His Legacy Michelle Gamblin-Green, Moderator

10:30-11:00am Jolie Rocke (San Jacinto College) “The Sopranos of the Boone Concert Company”

The Blind Boone Concert Company employed female soloists to perform on their traveling tours through North America since its inception in 1879. In addition to performing solo repertoire accompanied by Boone, the ladies managed correspondence, assisted with bookkeeping and other necessary tasks. Some were chosen for their emerging talent as teenagers while others had established careers as members of other performing organizations and traveling troupes. Several attended Lincoln institute at Jefferson City, now known as Lincoln University of Missouri, a public historically black land-grant university that was founded in 1866. Having been inspired and educated by their experiences on the road, most became property owners and ran businesses of their own during their marriages. Company soprano Melissa Fuell Cuther was commissioned by the company to write Boone’s biography, which was first published in 1915 and has become the leading primary historical source of his life’s work. We will explore the music, lives and responsibilities of the leading singers of the Blind Boone Company over its 48 years of operation.

11:10-11:40am Lindsay Wright (Yale University), “Duel or Duet: Blind Boone, Blind Tom, and the Politics of Comparison”

On March 3, 1880, two musicians shared a stage. During a concert by Thomas “Blind Tom” Wiggins, the virtuosic, neuroatypical, enslaved pianist, a young pianist named John Boone—also Black, also blind—accepted an invitation to challenge Wiggins’ imitative powers. Despite the chasm between these musicians’ lived realities, their commonalities compelled those witnessing the encounter “to take its history, seek out precedent, write its narratives” (Berlant 2007). While echoes of this meeting would follow Boone throughout his lifetime, its implications varied: was it a duel, with Boone emerging victorious? Was it a duet, a passing of a baton? This moment and its afterlives, I argue, offer a glimpse into the politics of comparison for black musicians during this era—regarding race and disability’s manifold entanglements (Pickens 2019), and racial uplift ideologies more broadly (Du Bois 1903). I examine different renderings of this encounter—in a 1915 biography of Boone (Fuell-Cuther); a fictional novel that blurs their identities (Cather 1918); a live 2014 reenactment of the original event; and a fabulative poetic re-imagining (Jess 2016).

11:45pm Lunch

1:00-2:00pm Campus Tour: Lincoln University of Missouri

2:00-3:00pm Networking and What’s Next? (Pawley classroom) Jolie Rocke, Moderator

3:00pm Depart/Jefferson City, MO

3:30pm Arrive/Columbia, MO

5:30pm Gala (JW Boone Home, Columbia)

THE JOHN WILLIAM “BLIND” BOONE HERITAGE FOUNDATION

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