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Hello, and welcome to Busy Kids Love Music! I'm Carly, the creator of Busy Kids Do Piano, and I'm thrilled to have you with me today as we dive into the life of an extraordinary musician and composer, Blind Tom Wiggins. His story is one of incredible talent, resilience, and the harsh realities of living as an enslaved person in 19th-century America. Blind Tom's life is a powerful reminder of the strength of the human spirit and the injustices of slavery. Let's explore his fascinating journey and his contributions to music.

"Blind Tom" Wiggins was born Thomas Greene Wiggins on May 25, 1849, in Georgia. Tom was born into slavery and was blind from birth, which made his early years incredibly challenging. His parents, Charity and Mingo Wiggins, were enslaved on the plantation of General James Bethune.

From a very young age, Tom showed an extraordinary ability to mimic sounds and play music. At just four years old, he wandered into the plantation house and began picking out melodies on the family piano, even though he had never had a single music lesson. Recognizing Tom's remarkable talent, General Bethune saw an opportunity. He arranged for Tom to receive music instruction, but not out of kindness. Instead, Bethune exploited Tom's abilities, presenting him as a musical prodigy and earning a fortune by showcasing him in performances across the United States and Europe.

Wiggins' musical style was as unique as his story. He could instantly reproduce any piece of music he heard, no matter how complex. But Tom didn't just mimic music—he created his own. His compositions often reflected the sounds of the world around him. For example, his piece "The Battle of Manassas" – the piece you are listening to now – is a dramatic retelling of a Civil War battle, complete with imitations of cannon fire, bugle calls, and marching soldiers.

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Tom's music combined elements of classical and popular styles, often drawing from the African American spirituals and folk music he heard as a child. His performances were mesmerizing, blending his original compositions with flawless renditions of Beethoven, Mozart, and other great composers. Despite his blindness and lack of formal education, Tom's musical genius shone brightly.

It is also possible that Tom Wiggins was autistic, though he was never diagnosed as such during his lifetime. Many modern researchers and historians have speculated that Tom displayed traits consistent with autism, such as his extraordinary musical memory, ability to mimic sounds perfectly, intense focus on music, and challenges with social interaction and communication. But during Tom's time, autism was not recognized as a condition, so there were no formal diagnoses or understanding of neurodiversity, so conclusions about his neurodiversity remain speculative.

While Blind Tom's talent brought him fame, it also subjected him to terrible exploitation. He was treated not as a person but as property, and the profits from his performances went entirely to his enslavers and later to the Bethune family after the abolition of slavery. Tom's life was tightly controlled—he was shuffled from city to city for performances, with little consideration for his well-being.

Even after slavery was abolished, Tom's life didn't improve much. Legal guardianship disputes over him continued, with various people fighting over who would control his income. Despite his genius, Tom never experienced true freedom or independence. He died in 1908 following a major stroke, and leaving behind a legacy of music that is as poignant as it is powerful.

Since his death in 1908, Blind Tom Wiggins has been increasingly recognized as one of the most extraordinary musical talents of the 19th century, and his story has sparked important discussions about genius, exploitation, and resilience. Scholars, musicians, and historians have

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revisited his life and work, emphasizing the brilliance of his compositions and his unique place in American music history. Several documentaries, books, and stage productions have explored his life, helping to bring his story to modern audiences. Today, Blind Tom is celebrated not only for his remarkable talent but also as a symbol of the enduring spirit of enslaved individuals who created beauty despite unimaginable oppression. His music continues to be performed and studied, serving as a testament to his genius and a reminder of the cultural contributions of African Americans throughout history.

If you head to this episode's show notes at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/144, you'll find a link to a curated playlist of some of Tom Wiggins' incredibly gorgeous piano compositions. Listening to Tom's music and sharing his story with others is one way to honor his memory and ensure that his contributions to music are never forgotten. Again you can find that playlist at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/144.

Thank you for joining me today to learn about Blind Tom Wiggins, a musician whose story deserves to be heard and celebrated. I hope you'll join me again in 2 weeks when our next brand new episode of Busy Kids Love Music airs. Make sure to subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts so that you don't miss it! I look forward to connecting with you then.