

Man With A Mission

by Andrew Peeples

*"It's a long, long way to Tipperary,
but my heart's right there."*

Thus ended a famous song written during World War I for a homesick Irish soldier. A lively tune with universal appeal, it found its way to the little town of Bluffton, SC, fired the musical talent of a certain boy, and started him off on a most unusual career.

Today, a half century later, he is still living in the house where he was born, and is not only the town's Mister Music, but also its most popular, most loved, and most permanent bachelor.¹

Through the years music lovers from near and far have been attracted to his home. Well known personalities who have crossed his threshold to enjoy good music, good conversation, and perhaps a good pot of tea, include Margaret Fuller, the novelist, whose book, *One World At A Time*, has a Bluffton setting; Dr. Marshall Bartholomew of Yale University; and John Boles, the popular opera and motion picture star of a by-gone day.²

When he was a child, the piano in his home fascinated him. But unlike most children, he had no desire to bang the keyboard. He would approach it timidly, and touch the keys softly, as though they were the keys to some sacred and forbidden magic. There came a day, however, when he was suddenly inspired to give his hands free play on that awesome keyboard. He had been watching his aunt, his mother's youngest sister, play and sing *Tipperary*. After she left the room, he sat on the piano stool and amazed his family by pounding out the same tune.

After that, under the tutelage of his mother and local teachers, his talent developed rapidly. He continued his musical training through college and a conservatory from which he was graduated with high honors. His brilliant performance at his graduation recital convinced

many that fame and fortune awaited him on the concert stage.

But he had other plans—plans that brought him back to his beloved Bluffton to fulfill a long-cherished dream. It was a dream of work that could be done by him alone.

Part of his dream has become a reality. He has completed the collection and arrangements of most of the beautiful Negro spirituals that have been a Low Country tradition since the beginning of our Southern culture.³

In accomplishing this Herculean task, he spent literally hundreds of hours, day and night, in the shadows of churches and praise-houses, both on the mainland and on nearby islands, gathering his material firsthand in natural settings.⁴

As a corollary to this labor of love, he helped organize and directed a group of the community's finest spiritual singers. With gratifying success they were presented before many large and enthusiastic audiences, including one in the Municipal Auditorium in Savannah.

His preservation of these rapidly disappearing spirituals has been nationally recognized. Many of his arrangements have been sung by the Yale Glee Club and other well-known groups.

He is now devoting more time to his own compositions and to special arrangements of some of America's most beautiful hymns.

One of his original works, written for the Bluffton High School, is used annually at graduation exercises, as well as on other occasions.⁵

He writes most of his lyrics, reflecting his deeply religious nature in his themes of the poor, the humble, and particularly the old who have seen better days and live only by "trusting

1 This article was first published on 8-22-65. Luke Peeples died in 1994.

2 Also, DuBose Heyward, author of *Porgy and Bess*, came to see Luke for help with the Gullah dialect.

3 *The Collected Works of Luke Peeples* were published in 2014. See astarfell.com or thebookpatch.com for details.

4 While we found many of Luke's works the present editor fears that many of his transcriptions have been lost.

5 There were two pieces, *Processional* and *Recessional*.

in the Lord."

Music is his first love, but he is keenly interested in all forms of art. Mention painting or poetry, for example, and you have his eager attention. He keeps a blackboard near his piano and can quickly illustrate the difference between one art form and another with the deftness of a professional art instructor. A master of mimicry and pantomime, he can instantly give the illusion of anything he describes, from an infant cooing in his crib to an old man confused in his cups.

When he plays his piano—it might be any time between daybreak and midnight—pedestrians pause at his front gate. Now and then one ventures all the way to the front porch and presses his nose against a window, and watches and listens to what might be a Mozart minuet, a Chopin prelude, a Beethoven sonata, a Negro spiritual, one of his original compositions, or almost anything except jazz which he cannot abide.

Apart from music, he acquired certain

practical skills, including typing and shorthand, that have made him indispensable to the Bluffton community. Of necessity, his time is divided between his desk and his piano, both of which, sensibly enough, he keeps in the same room.

Like his talents, his hobbies are many and varied, embracing such diverse activities as bird watching and experimenting with original concoctions in a skillet or saucepan in his very private kitchen.

In this age of conformity, when everybody is expected to fashion his life to a mass pattern, he has dared to make his own and be different.

And indeed he is different! He has been different all the way from Tipperary. And in being different he has found his happiness in life.

How do I know?

Well, you see, his name is Luke Peebles and he is my brother.