

A True History of Footnotes Perhaps (Part 1)

Herein find the true history of the composition and performance and recording of *Footnotes*, compiled from archival sources supplemented by careful, logical deductions when those sources are incomplete. No “fake news,” this, but scholarship of the most rigorous kind, undertaken by certified academics under the supervision of and reviews by informed “critical friends” of most dispassionate temperaments.

So . . . why are you laughing?

Composition, phase 1

Prehistory: WB had lived in England from Sep 1977 to Oct 1979, and three works had been played in London, with mixed results: *Madrigals* (by Electric Phoenix), *Medley* (by Peter and Muriel Dickinson), and *Wallpaper Pieces* (by Dwight Peltzer). Michael Cedric Smith was a friend of Katherine Preston, then an emerging musicologist with whom WB became acquainted in early 1980. Smith was planning a London debut concert and Preston suggested that he ask WB for a piece.

1980, spring: First discussions, WB with Michael Cedric Smith. [CV Comp Info]

1980, winter through 1981, spring: Entire set of six pieces conceived and roughly planned [CV Comp Info; WB memory]

1981 04 29: “Cotten” sketches and drafts commence. [CV Comp Info]

1981 in or after 05: “Cage” sketches and drafts commence. [CV Comp Info]

1981 06 29: “Cotten” drafts are completed. [CV Comp Info]

1981 09 14: “Cage” drafts are completed. [CV Comp Info]

1981 09 23: “Crump” sketches and drafts commence. [CV Comp Info]

1981 10 06: “Crump” drafts are completed. [CV Comp Info]

1981 09 and 10: Fair copies of “Cage,” “Cotten,” and “Crump” are completed. [WB deduction]

NB: All the sketches, drafts, and fair copies seem to be lost or mislaid at this point, except for a very few pages that were made into transparencies for lectures given in the 1980s and 1990s. WB had lived in England from Sep 1977 to Oct 1979, and three works had been played there, with mixed results: *Madrigals* (by Electric Phoenix), *Medley* (by Peter and Muriel Dickinson), and *Wallpaper Pieces* (by Dwight Peltzer). Michael Cedric Smith was a friend of Katherine Preston, then an emerging musicologist with whom WB became acquainted in early 1980. Smith was planning a London debut concert and Preston suggested he ask WB for a piece.

Performances, phase 1

Playing from the fair copies (not the eventual ink scores), Michael Cedric Smith gave the two premieres [all information from CV Comp Info or from scanned documents]: 1981 11 30: “Cage,” “Cotten,” and “Crump” at the Purcell Room, London (world premiere).

Barry Millington, “Smooth Sounds from Japan,” *London Times*, 1980 12 10:

“One of the movements of William Brooks’s *Footnotes* for guitar is entitled ‘Cage’, giving warning that the instrument has been ‘prepared’ with paper clips, rubber bands, pieces of string and so on. Some of the mid-movement changes required adroit manoeuvring and Michael Cedric Smith’s task in giving its premiere was to convince that it was all worthwhile. That he was unsuccessful probably was not his fault, and he produced some effective ‘bottlenecking’ in ‘Crump’ and some catchy rhythms in ‘Cotton’.”

1982 01 24 and 25: “Cage,” “Cotten,” and “Crump” on the “PLUM” concerts in Washington DC and Bethesda MD (US premiere).

Program note (probably by Michael Cedric Smith): “After intermission guitarist Michael Cedric Smith will play the first complete American performance of a new work composed for him by William Brooks. The piece uses as its starting point the music of three other American composers: John Cage, the guru of the avant-garde; Elizabeth Cotton, a black folk-guitarist from South Carolina who is most notes as the composer of ‘Freight Train;’ and W. C. Handy, composer of the ‘Memphis Blues’ or ‘Mr. Crump’s Blues’ as it was first titled. Of particular interest in this three-movement work is the use of unusual guitar techniques such as prepared guitar, ‘bottle-necking,’ and toe-tapping (real footnotes as it were).”

In 1981-82 Smith was an adjunct teacher of guitar at Brooklyn College, and he arranged for a studio recording of all three pieces to be made on 12 March 1982. The reel-to-reel master is now in the William Brooks papers, Series 7, Box 28, Item 3, in the University of Illinois Archives. A digital transfer of that recording was made at the University of Illinois in the late 1990s and archived on CD.

Composition, Phase 2

1981 12 and 1982 02: “Cotten, *loc. cit.*” is sketched. [CV Comp Info]

1982 01 10: Michael Cedric Smith, in a letter to WB: “Good news re: guitar tremolo—repeated notes on [string] 2 with the thumb on [string] 1 work fine. The same arrangement with the repeated notes on [string] 3 and thumb on [string] 1 will sound a little awkward.” [scanned document]

1982 03 04: “Cotten” final ink copy is begun. [CV Comp Info]

1982 04 23: “Cotten” final ink copy is completed. [CV Comp Info]

1982 06 21: “Cotten, *loc. cit.*” drafts commence. [CV Comp Info]

1982 07 26: “Cotten, *loc. cit.*” drafts are completed. [CV Comp Info]

1982 09 07: “Cage” final ink copy is begun. [CV Comp Info]

1983 02 18: "Cage" final ink copy is completed. [CV Comp Info]
 1983 11 06: "*ibid.*" drafts commence. [CV Comp Info]
 1983 12 04: "*ibid.*" drafts are completed. [CV Comp Info]
 1984 01 05: "Cage, *passim*" drafts commence. [CV Comp Info]
 1984 02 03: "Cage, *passim*" drafts are completed. [CV Comp Info]
 1984 02 06: "Cage, *passim*" final ink copy is begun. [CV Comp Info]
 1984 04 08: "Cage, *passim*" final ink copy is completed. [CV Comp Info]
 1984 05 to 09: "*ibid.*" and "Cotten, *loc. cit.*" ink drafts are completed. [WB memory]

Performances, phase 2

Still playing from the fair copy, between 1982 and 1984 Michael Cedric Smith gave at least fourteen performances of "Cotten" only [all information from CV Comp Info or from scanned documents]:

1982, autumn: St. Gabriel's Church, Grant Circle, DC
 1982 10 10: American Institute of Guitar (204 W. 55th St), New York NY
 1982 10 20: Brooklyn College, Brooklyn NY
 1982 11 21: River Road Church, Richmond VA
 1982 12 16: Goodman House (129 W. 67th St), New York NY
 1983 12 03: Hall of Musical Instruments, National Museum of American History, Washington DC
 1984 02 13: Prince George's Community College, MD
 1984 02 2x: Buffalo Guitar Society, Buffalo NY
 1984 02 22: Berkman Auditorium, Hartt School of Music, Hartford CT
 1984 02 25: Rockland Arts Center, Ellicott City MD
 1984 02 26: Towson State University, Towson MD
 1984 03 01: Carnegie Recital Hall, New York City

Bernard Holland, "Recital: Michael Smith, Guitarist," *New York Times*,

1984 03 04: "'Cotton,' with its amiable mood and foot-tapping accompaniments, summoned snatches of ragtime, clutched them briefly and then finally let go in mid phrase. Its fragmentary reaching into the past—which was subtle and almost self-mocking in tone—had the kind of wry nostalgia that characterizes the music of Ives. Mr. Smith played it delicately.

1984 05 02: St. Mark's Dance Company, Textile Museum, Washington DC
 Dancer Mary Craighill choreographed "Cotten," with live music provided by Smith. There were some subsequent performances using the recording, almost certainly; on 8 Sep 1985, WB wrote Craighill: "Enclosed is a copy of 'Crump.' I'm glad you're interested in pursuing the choreography and I look forward to the results. . . If you do wind up performing the piece, in whole or in part, it might be appropriate to contact Michael Cedric Smith to be sure he has no objections to your using the tape. (I mention this in part because he

was talking at one point about a commercial recording.)”

1984 06 08: Anderson House, Washington DC

A student of Smith, John Meyers, performed “Cotten” and “Crump” on 1 Dec 1982 at UMBC (University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Catonsville MD). On 26 Jan 1984, WB wrote Sarah Cohn, then managing Michael Cedric Smith, with a description of all six movements of *Footnotes* for use in grant applications (see below); and a letter on 21 Jun 1984 from WB to Donald Bruce, at Franklin Pierce College, Rindge, NH, indicates that Michael and he had discussed joint appearances as part of a kind of residency. In September 1985 another UMBC student, Mark Kressley, acquired “Crump” and “Cotten,” but there is no record of a performance by him.

Summary description

First drafted on 25 January 1984 for Sarah Cohn (see above), this was revised substantially on 23 June 1984, after all six movements had been completed. It was then updated further, first for Terry Edwards (date uncertain) and then for Jeff Kust (31 Jan 1986; see below).

Footnotes is a suite for solo guitar in six movements: “Cage”, “Cotten”, “Crump”, “*ibid.*”, “Cotten, *loc. cit.*”, and “Cage, *passim*”. Any two or more may be performed in any order, except that “*ibid.*”, if played, must follow immediately a performance of “Crump”. The movements are available singly or as a set, from Smith Publications.

As their names intimate, the six *Footnotes* embrace a wide range of stylistic and musicological references. John Cage is a celebrated contemporary composer who is perhaps best-known for his invention of the prepared piano (a piano the sound of which has been altered by the application of various objects to the strings) and for his use of chance techniques in composition. Elizabeth Cotten is a black folk and blues guitarist, in her eighties at the time of composition, who was discovered while working as Charles Seeger’s cleaning lady. Edward H. Crump was a Memphis political boss; during his 1913 campaign for mayor, W. C. Handy wrote “Mr. Crump”, a piece which later became celebrated as “The Memphis Blues.”

The three *Footnotes* titled with names alone make specific musical reference to their sources. In “Cage” the guitar is prepared with a matchstick, string, a nail, and other objects, and the compositional material recalls Cage’s prepared piano pieces; the movement is also structured using the “square root” principle evolved by Cage to organize his percussion music. “Cotten” is based entirely on a ragtime fragment remembered from a performance by Elizabeth Cotten; during the movement this fragment is gradually assembled and disassembled. A strict scheme regulates silences, strings used, fretboard positions, and picking patterns. In “Crump” the refrain of “Memphis Blues” is presented in a long, bitonal

crescendo; the guitarist's left little finger is capped with a metal slide so that the guitar can be played in a "bottleneck" blues style.

The other three *Footnotes* utilize the same source material more abstractly. In "*ibid.*" the "Memphis Blues" melody is distorted slightly to make an 11-note tone row; this becomes the basis for a tightly controlled, abstractly expressionistic statement. Cotten, *loc. cit.*", in contrast, uses an impressionistic idiom in which guitar tremolandi drift into and out of focus; the pitches used are exactly those present in the Cotten ragtime fragment. "Cage, *passim*" recapitulates Cage's compositional history by presenting nine units of material for each of which a different compositional method was employed; there is also an addenda of three units which reuses the sounds in "Cage". All twelve of the "Cage, *passim*" units were written using chance procedures, and the twelve can be conjoined in many different ways.

The movements of the set are also structurally linked to each other. The three "name" movements are fully notated, with no unusual liberties given the performer. Formally, they are straightforward: in "Crump" the music accumulates, in "Cage" it dissolves, and in "Cotten" it both accumulates and dissolves. The morphology of the other three movements is less directional, since each is essentially a concatenation of largely independent units. In addition, each of these three movements requires that the performer make compositional decisions. These are minimal in "*ibid.*", in which it is necessary only to decide the placement of certain harmonics; in "Cotten, *loc. cit.*", however, the order of the units within three large sections must be chosen, and in "Cage, *passim*" the order of all the units (many of which are themselves indeterminate) must be decided, subject only to the very loose regulation of a kind of magic square. Finally, in all six movements the proportions and rhythms are controlled quite strictly by formulae derived from the ratio 3:4:5 (the smallest integer values which can be applied to the sides of a right triangle).

[A further paragraph summarizes the compositional history given above.]

Publication

By at least the summer of 1984 WB had arranged with Sylvia Smith to have *Footnotes* included in Smith Publications' catalog. (No contract seems to have survived among WB's papers, but more complete correspondence is probably available at the University of Akron, which houses the Smith Publications archive.) His 8 Sep 1985 letter to Mary Craighill included: "it would be a boon to me if you would insert in the program a notice to the effect that *Footnotes* is published by Smith Publications," so publication had certainly been agreed by then. The score itself wasn't ready in final form until 10 Dec 1985, however, according to a postscript to a letter dated 2 Dec 1985

from WB to Sylvia Smith; the package also included a cover page and mockups of bound movements. WB explained: “The pieces will be marketable both individually and as a set. In thinking about ways to handle this, I recalled the old 19th-century sheet music practice of printing a single title page (to serve as a kind of folder) on which all the items were indicated; then the publisher simply put a tick mark next to the items or items that were actually included. . . . (If you like this idea, I’ve also recalled the 19th-century promotional technique of including enticing snippets from the other items on the back cover. But this might be a bit pushy for your tastes; fine by me, either way.)” He also mentioned efforts at promotion that included a possible article by Michael Cedric Smith in *Guitar Magazine*, but nothing seems to have come of these.

Limbo

In early autumn 1985, WB moved from Baltimore to Illinois, thus making contact with Michael Cedric Smith and with Sylvia Smith more problematic. He also began adjunct teaching at the University of Illinois, being appointed to a full-time position in 1987. These and other factors combined to limit severely efforts to promote earlier work. In January 1986 he was contacted by a Chicago guitarist, Jeffrey Kust, who expressed interest in *Footnotes*. Kust performed “Cotten” on a concert at the Music Club, Manchester, CT, 14 September 1986, and “Cotten” and “Crump” on a faculty recital at the Arts Center, Hinsdale, IL. [CV Comp Info and scanned documents] WB contributed to a festival-conference on John Cage in 1988 at Wesleyan University, and as part of that event Michael Cedric Smith revived his performance of “Cage” on 22 Feb 1988. A ceremony on 2 Mar 1992 welcomed Sylvia Smith’s archives to the University of Akron, and a recital of composers published by Smith Publications included “Cotten,” “Crump,” and “Cotten, *loc. cit.*,” performed by James Marron, who repeated his performance on 8 Mar 1998 at the University of Illinois, on WB’s retrospective concert. [CV Comp Info and scanned documents]

In 1996 Steve Goss, then living in London, contacted WB to ask for a copy of *Footnotes*, receipt of which he acknowledged on a postcard of 13 June 1996. Goss remained actively interested in the work, and spoke with WB very intermittently at academic events after the latter moved to England in autumn 2000. One long-term consequence was the incorporation of several examples from the score into Martin Vishnick’s PhD thesis, which Vishnick completed in 2014 under Goss’s supervision. Other, very occasional inquiries, on both sides of the Atlantic, had no practical results whatsoever.