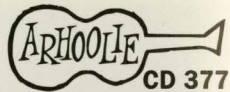


Texas Barrelhouse Piano
ROBERT SHAW
"The Ma Grinder"



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(Ma Grinder #2) (2:10)

Total time: 72:00

#1, 3, 7, 9, 12 & 14 are piano instrumentals.

#12 - 17 previously unreleased.



Robert Shaw - piano & vocals

Selections #1 - 11: recorded by Mack McCormick at Austin Custom Recorders in Austin, Texas, in March of 1963. All previously issued on ARH LP 1010, except # 3 which was issued on ARH LP 1017.

Selections #12 - 17: all previously unissued and recorded by Chris Strachwitz in Austin, Texas, on portable equipment at Mr. Shaw's home. #12,13, & 14 on May 1, 1977; #15, 16, & 17 on April 23 & 24, 1973.

Cover photo by Chris Strachwitz

Cover art by Wayne Pope

Produced by Chris Strachwitz & Mack McCormick

Notes by Mack McCormick with postscripts by Chris Strachwitz & Victoria Spivey

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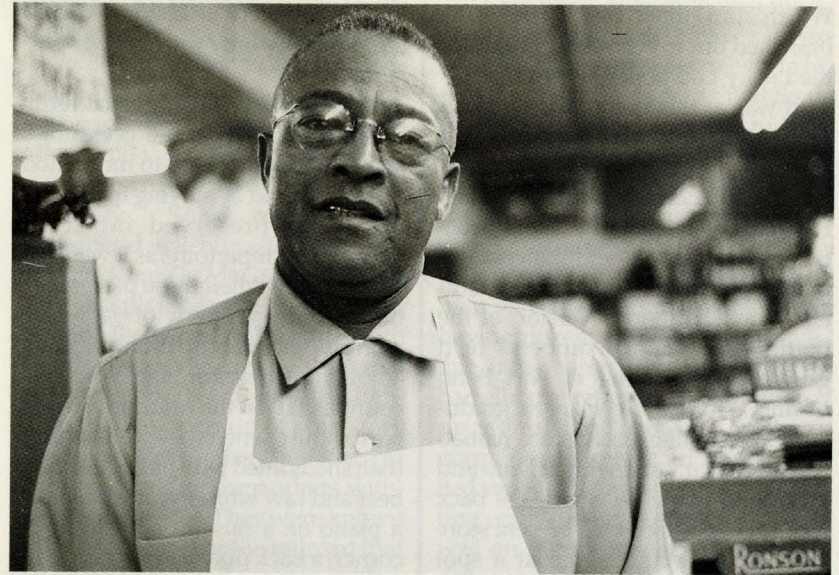


ROBERT SHAW – “The Ma Grinder”

Robert Shaw of Austin, Texas, was the proprietor of Shaw's Food Market and Barbecue on Manor Road: a smiling, round-faced man in a white apron. In 1962 they named him Texas' outstanding Negro businessman. In his youth, he was a barrelhouse piano player. And, in private, he still played that characteristic Texas piano — the erotic, exuberantly stomping music that once thrived in workingmen's roadhouses and tonks. Robert Shaw was the best of the Texas barrelhouse men still to be heard in 1963.

Shaw was born August 9, 1908, in Stafford, Texas, a cattle town in Fort Bend County that has since become a suburb of sprawling Houston. As a teenager he worked cattle on his father's ranch, learned butchering and barbecuing, and started playing piano — beginning with a *Chopsticks* – like version of *Boil Them Cabbage Down*. Eventually he joined the group that played hot piano in the wide-open

Brazos Bottoms towns of Sugar Land and Richmond, along West Dallas Street in Houston's Fourth Ward, and in the warehouses of Galveston's Post Office Street district. The places mentioned in the old songs — *Mud Alley*, *Church Street*, *McKinney Street*, *The Vamp*, *Loma Linda*, *The Reservation*, and *The Brown House* — are places where he learned, played, and gradually rose to full membership in an itinerant pack of pianists who came to be known loosely as “the Santa Fe group,” partly because they favored that railroad and partly because a stranger asking for the name of a selection was invariably told “That's The Santa Fe.” (The piano tradition, not to mention guitar and harmonica, practically began as train imitations: a rhythmic bass to capture the pattern of rail clicks is one of the first things all the players learned as children. Thus, the music and the railroads are intimately related).



Robert Shaw: barrelhouse pianist, grocer, barbeque man.

Photo by Mack McCormick

Drifting with the seasonal labor gangs, Shaw worked the joints around Kingsville during the south Texas cotton picking season, then went off to Kilgore and the oil boom in East Texas. In 1932 he was playing in the Black

Orange Cafe on Kansas City's 12th Street, and the next year he had a radio program sponsored by a furniture store over KFXR in Oklahoma City. Back in Texas he took a job at the rowdy upstairs dance hall in Fort

Worth's Jim Hotel. Next, in Austin, he branched out to become a runner for the Lucky Lou policy wheel.

It was at this point, after a brush with the law and ten years of playing piano for a living, Shaw decided barbecuing would provide a simpler life. He opened an ice house in east Austin, sold barbecue, held dances, and played piano to entertain the customers — a continuous version of the traditional “country suppers” he'd grown up attending in Fort Bend County. After a few years he graduated to a small grocery store named “Stop & Swat,” still with a piano and a domino game set up in the back room. Then he built his present store on Austin's Manor Road at a spot where black and white sections overlap. His neighborhood customers came about equally from the two groups, and with the barbecue trade they added up to enough customers to make the big supermarket down the street clearly envious. But with the new store the piano moved into

his house where he continued playing, but now only for his own pleasure.

As a result of this unusual retirement, he was under no pressure to learn or adapt himself to more modern music, and by staying in practice, Shaw has preserved intact the barrelhouse repertoire, as it was 30 or 40 years ago when these pieces were the common property of legions of pianists who grew up in Houston and adjoining Galveston and Fort Bend counties. It is the tradition of the barrelhouse when they were literally that: sheds lined with barrels of chock beer and raw whiskey, an open floor, a piano on a raised platform in the corner, a back door opening on a line of rooms, each with a woman and a bed.

Along with Tink, Roadhouse, Lazy Daddy, and All Night Jack (Shaw himself was known as Fud in those days) he shared in developing the music so closely identified with the Houston-Ft. Bend-Galveston pianists: the Blues

dedicated to ramblers such as *Jim Nappy* and *Shorty George*; the bawdy, no-holds-barred things like *Whores Is Funky*; and the stomping solo exhibitions, supreme of which are the elaborations known as *The Ma Grinder*.

“When a new man'd come looking for work,” Shaw recalls, “the barkeeper'd tell him, ‘Let me hear you knock out *The Ma Grinder*.’” What one did with it became the measure. (**Pinetop Burks** and **Rob Cooper** both recorded their versions as accompaniments to vocals in the 1930s). Others in this select group of obligatory pieces were *The Clinton*, *The Fives*, *The Cows*, and half a dozen others without specific names. They were known as *The Santa Fe* after the railroad that straddles Fort Bend County with a big triangle just southwest of Houston, providing access westward to the high plains, cotton country, east to the piney-woods lumbering camps, and north (pretty much following the old Chisholm Trail) to a string of cities and minor watering places.

“One piece of barrelhouse music hangs into the next,” Shaw said explaining the recurrent elements in his playing, “just the same as that Santa Fe don't go far before it has to cross over itself.” It was, on the whole, a small, tightly knit, ingrown body of music. A pianist might have no more than 30 distinct selections, and of these, 25 might be the same as the previous man played. (Though a single blues, having dozens of verses, was divisible into many parts.) However, a barrelhouse repertoire is not offered up as a balanced and contrasted program. The dancers require only a limited variety of tempos, essentially splitting up into stomps and rubs. (There was an accompanying tradition of dance, a particular buck dance that went with *The Fives* and a kind of cakewalking strut that went with *The Ma Grinder*, usually performed by male customers in a solo exhibition style). Moreover, the selections are divided up not by character but by the clock. A barrelhouse proprietor

wanted music followed by silence in order that the customers buy drinks and pick out a different girl for the next dance.

Among the oldest pieces is a lilting number invariably credited to **Peg Leg Will**, (he was playing when a “flashy thing” named **Jelly Roll Morton** came to town in 1908), known as *Put Me In The Alley*. “You oughta seen them gals,” Shaw said, “they’d see Will at the piano and start hollering, *Put Me In The Alley*, Will, *Put Me In The Alley*, poppa.’ Oh, they was terrible about that piece.”

A few of the typical songs were borrowed like *People, People* and *Piggly Wiggly Blues*, a pun on the grocery store chain of that name, which everyone in the Santa Fe group seemed to have learned from **Charlie McFadden**. But most were peculiar to the region. *The Clinton* was originated by “two raggedy brothers” and dedicated to the famed stopping place at a junction of the Santa Fe lines in Oklahoma. *Hattie Green* has to do with a

legendary West Texas madam who the pianists would visit whenever they hit Abilene. *Black Gal* evolved with half a dozen members of the group contributing verses and melodic bits until Joe Pullum’s hit record made it a nationally known blues standard.

The Santa Fe group as such, active for decades and well-defined as it was, went largely unnoticed. A few of the players and bits of the repertoire are known to collectors through the records by Burks, Cooper, et al., but the total picture was poorly represented on the early 78s (still, the strong ties in style and material are apparent when they are compared with the 1960s recordings of Shaw and **Buster Pickens**). On Texas visits the record companies discouraged instrumental solos and thus the strongest part of the tradition was passed over. The women who went to Chicago and New York were recorded theater style, standing up before a microphone (or horn) with someone else playing piano. There is little in the early records

of **Victoria Spivey**, **Hociel Thomas**, or **Sippie Wallace** to indicate they normally played for themselves, and in typical fashion had developed their own versions of *The Fives* and *The Ma Grinder*.

By the same token, what the collector knows as *Cow Cow Blues* and credits to **Cow Cow Davenport** has long had near-neighbors in the group’s *The Cows* and its companion *Put Me In The Alley*. Whether Davenport introduced it or acquired it during his Texas visits (“I remember him for that handkerchief he always wore round his head,” Shaw says) is remarkable both in the way it has been an indelible part of the repertoire (since at least 1920) and in the way different local players, contributing personal “turnarounds” and “runs,” have produced a maze of individual versions.

The Cows, together with most of the music represented in Shaw’s playing, has undergone the survival-of-the-fittest process that typically occurs within a group of closely knit

musicians who cull over, change, and expand upon a body of common material. Much is rejected by the simple device of being forgotten, a fraction is passed along for sharing. Thus a tradition is shaped. Innovations come, occasionally, from unexpected quarters: the distinctive bass theme in the final bars of *Here I Come With My Dirty, Dirty Duckings On* was contributed by a pianist with a withered left hand who used — as Shaw and the others learned to do — the edge of his hand to chop out the bass.

In talking and listening to Shaw and his contemporaries it quickly becomes evident that terms like “Texas style” or “Houston style” are vast oversimplifications. Shaw can describe and demonstrate subtle distinctions between players who circulated in Houston’s Fifth Ward and those in his own Fourth Ward group, districts less than two miles apart. Yet, **Alex Moore**, a Dallas pianist (where *Bucket of Blood* was standard but *The Ma Grinder* little known)

promptly identified Shaw as "on the Houston kick" after hearing only a brief fragment of this record. Likewise, Shaw can listen to records by **Mercy Dee, Alex Moore, or Will Ezell** and accurately place them as representative of, respectively, Waco, Dallas, and Shreveport "styles."

Broadly speaking, Shaw represents a very particularized Houston area style and repertoire, and at the same time demonstrates characteristics common to much Texas barrelhouse piano: a hard hitting, physically heavy touch with fast releases and strongly stated initial themes; strong elements of ragtime, particularly in playing Blues with rag syncopation and technique; occasional use of one-note bass passages in lieu of the walking bass; and a tendency to rush and anticipate the beat where pianists in other areas may more commonly delay the beat. It has no sharp definition nor proper name, though the pianists themselves sometimes vaguely refer to their playing as

in the "rambling style."

Above all it was music to engender forgetfulness, hard drinking, free spending, and fun. "When you listen to what I'm playing," Shaw would say "you got to see in your mind all them gals out there swinging their butts and getting the mens excited. Otherwise you ain't got the music rightly understood. I could sit there and throw my hands down and make them gals do anything. I told them when to shake it, and when to hold it back. That's what this music is for."

Mack McCormick- 1963

Postscripts:

In 1965, after the release of this, his first and only album, Robert Shaw suffered a heart attack. He nevertheless continued to work at his store and also began to travel a good deal and eventually became quite a celebrity in Austin. In 1974 Robert Shaw went to Europe to play concerts in Holland, Germany, and Switzerland as part of a piano tour which also included **Little**

Brother Montgomery, Boogie Woogie Red, and Blind John Davis. He appeared at the Armadillo World Headquarters, Austin's most important music venue during the 60s and 70s and became a favorite at the annual Kerrville Folk Festival. In 1976 Mr. Shaw bought a new piano with the hope of getting a good sound for his next Arhoolie album. We met on several occasions over the years at his home and made many tapes but only a few selections were of consistent quality to warrant release. I have included the best of them on this CD in addition to the material recorded by Mack McCormick in 1963. In 1981

Robert Shaw took a bus to California to make a surprise appearance at the 20th Anniversary Party for Arhoolie Records. If you have enjoyed his music, may I suggest you read the fine interview which appeared in the March/April 1978 issue of **Blues Unlimited (UK)**. It is a wonderful personal account of Mr. Shaw's travels and experiences during his early adventures as a barrelhouse pianist in Texas, Kansas City, and Oklahoma. Robert Shaw died in Austin, Texas, on May 18, 1985. His widow is receiving all royalty earnings from this CD release of his musical legacy.

Chris Strachwitz - 1992

*The legendary blues singer Victoria Spivey was writing a column in **Record Research** when Robert Shaw's LP album was originally released. Some of her comments, which appear in issue # 81 (January 1967), follow:*

"This album, a fine job, has great significance for me! Why?!! Because I was there, just like Mr. Shaw... I was a member of a clique that played west Texas from Galveston to Houston to Richmond to Sugarland. There were

Andy Boy, Joe Pullum, Houston, Bernice Edwards, Pearl Dickson, and myself. Houston was the greatest with Andy Boy a close second. I myself learned a lot from Robert and Johnny Calvin, and Henry "Lazy Daddy"

Fillmore – and of course from the ones mentioned above...Now, for a few memories about some of the tracks on this album, which is a credit to the Texas Blues. On *Black Gal*, my buddy Robert 'Fud' Shaw, must have really improvised the lyrics as it is very different from the original one by Joe Pullum. I first heard Joe sing this about 1925. In fact, I was there in his house in the bloody 5th Ward in Houston, Texas when Joe was making up the words... *The Ma Grinder* – these were fighting words that often led to bloodshed and death. We all used to play it in our own way. Some would sing it. The first one I ever heard sing it was Houston, who tore up Galveston and Houston with it. We all picked up different licks from him. Last time I heard of him was when he left Galveston and went to Kansas City in 1925 or 1926. Hattie Green, she was in the 1st Ward

(Houston) and had a 'meeting house' where all races could get together. Hattie was tall and thin, light skin, and had a big head of hair. Her brother was Tash Marshall, a big rock. My oldest brother, Willie, who was also a fair blues pianist, used to take his idle time there, and sometimes would play *The Galveston Blues*, now called the *Boogie Woogie*. Every chance I got I would sneak in and take over the piano chair when brother Willie was not around. I was very young then. The other tracks define the Texas Blues style in so many ways that it would require ten more pages to cover. So I'll stop here. I'm saving it for my book. Robert 'Fud' Shaw is a true representative of the wonderful Texas Blues tradition and it was a splendid idea to record him. History has been rewarded. 'Fud'! I would love to hear from you!"

Victoria Spivey – 1966

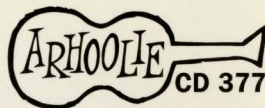
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The Texas barrelhouse pianists included a number of men with crippled hands: they chopped at the keys with the edge of their hand, and one amputee merrily used his elbow! To play the distinctive bass runs they evolved, Shaw uses the same technique on several selections. Photo by Mack McCormick

Texas Barrelhouse Piano
ROBERT SHAW
"The Ma Grinder"



Over 70 Minutes of Classic BLUES

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Robert Shaw - piano & vocals

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previously unreleased.*

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Robert Shaw - 1963

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