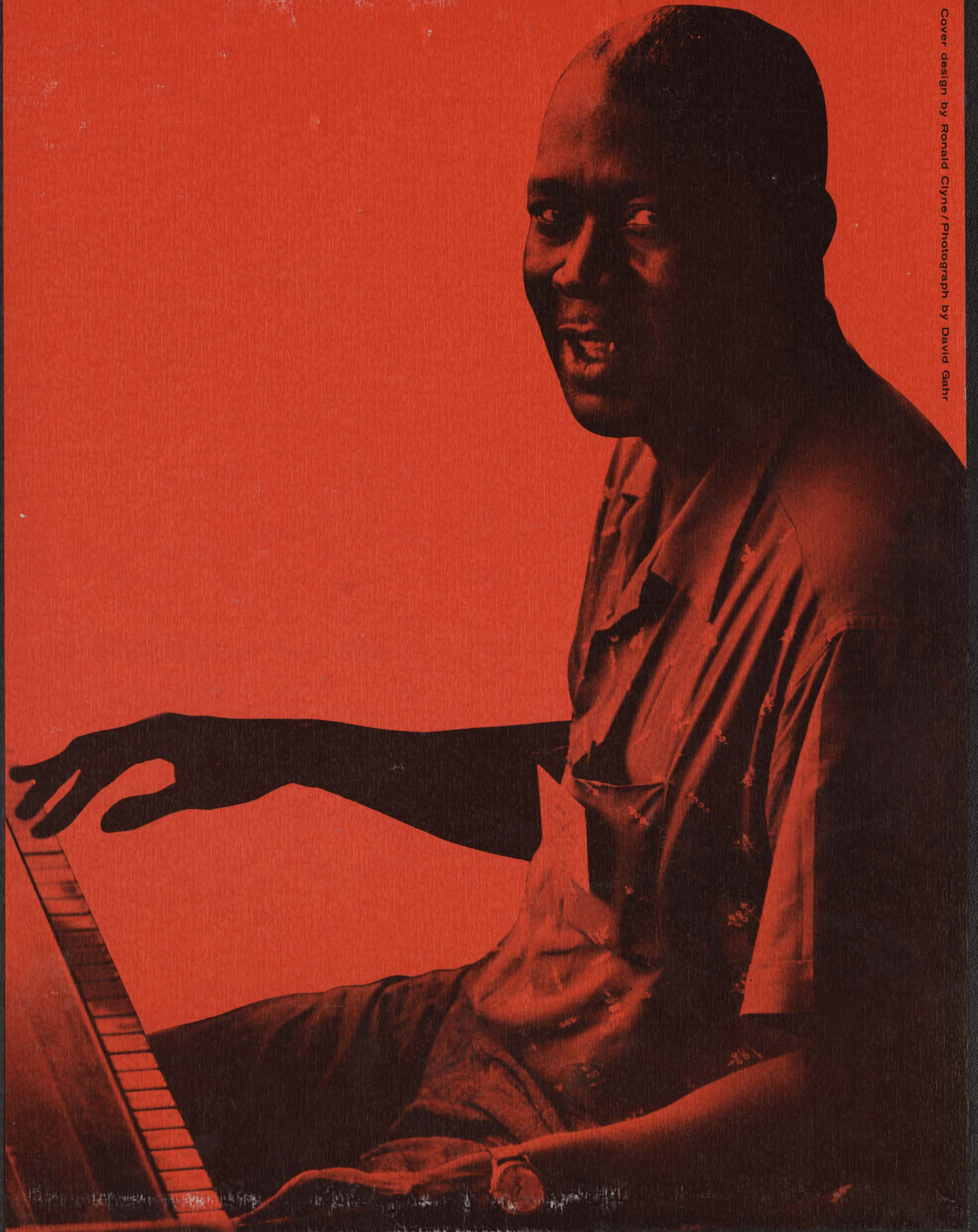


NOTES BY CHARLES EDWARD SMITH

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FG 3524

Cover design by Ronald Clyne/Photograph by David Gahr

The Real Boogie Woogie Memphis Slim, Piano Solos



FG 3524

The Real Boogie Woogie Memphis Slim, Piano Solos

Descriptive Notes are inside pocket

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632 BROADWAY, N.Y.C., 10012 N.Y., U.S.A.

WALKIN' THE BOOGIE
COW COW BLUES
JEFFERSON COUNTY BLUES
FOUR O'CLOCK BLUES
MISTER FREDDIE
TROUBLE IN MIND
44 BLUES
88 BOOGIE
SAIL ON BLUES
DOWN HOME BLUES
DOWN THAT BIG ROAD
ROLL AND TUMBLE
CROWING ROOSTER, VOCAL
WOMAN BLUES BOOGIE, VOCAL

FG 3524



Photo by Raeburn Flerage

MEMPHIS SLIM

and the real boogie-woogie

Notes by Charles Edward Smith

SIDE I

- Band 1: Walkin' the Boogie (Chatman)
- Band 2: Cow Cow Blues (Cow Cow Davenport)
- Band 3: Jefferson County Blues (Chatman)
- Band 4: Four O'Clock Blues (Chatman)
- Band 5: Mister Freddie (Chatman)
- Band 6: Trouble In Mind (Richard M. Jones)
- Band 7: 44 Blues (Traditional)

SIDE II

- Band 1: 88 Boogie (Chatman)
- Band 2: Sail On Blues (Traditional)
- Band 3: Down Home Blues (Chatman)
- Band 4: Down That Big Road (Chatman)
- Band 5: Roll and Tumble (Chatman)
- Band 6: Crowing Rooster (Lonnie Johnson/Peter Chatman)
- Band 7: Woman Blues Boogie (Chatman)

MEMPHIS SLIM AND THE REAL BOOGIE WOOGIE

by Charles Edward Smith

The article that follows was written with the help of a background piece by Raeburn Flerlage and notes of a conversation with Slim, the latter by Jacques Demetre of Jazz Hot, Paris, who talked with Slim while on a visit to Chicago in 1959.

An impressive, fresh sound in boogie woogie is heard in the playing of lanky (6'6") Peter Chatman, known professionally as Memphis Slim. It's a long time since Big Bill Broonzy told him, "You're playing like Sykes...Play like yourself." (The reference was to blues pianist Roosevelt Sykes.) It's even a long time since Big Bill broached the subject for the last time, speaking in an appreciative murmur over the sound of a slow blues, "Now you sound like Memphis Slim. Now you feel it."

Just as some singers and musicians have, as the phrase goes, a feeling for the blues, so a few of them -- and Memphis Slim is one -- have a feeling for the men and backgrounds that have made the blues a dynamic force in the music of our times. And just as the blues went through processes of change before jazz began and have been a constant challenge in jazz instrumental usage, from Louis Armstrong to Thelonious Monk, so in their own environment, between folk music of the South and the urban hillbilly (of North and South alike) called Rhythm and Blues, authentic blues have not only retained their identity but in the work of such men as Lightning Hopkins and Muddy Waters (vocal blues with guitar) and Memphis Slim (piano blues; vocal blues with piano) display continuing originality of expression.

In a summation of Slim's work, Raeburn Flerlage writes, "Slim has always been regarded (and regards himself) as having his roots and style firmly planted in Southern blues traditions. While he plays a variety of material -- folk songs and pop tunes as well as out and out blues -- he feels that a real blues musician brings a blues flavor to everything he does -- not because he consciously tries to do this, but because that's the way he feels about life. It's a way of looking at things, a way of feeling the music, and a blues man always feels it that way, whether to a greater or lesser extent."

It was suggested to Jacques Demetre that he ask Slim about the backgrounds of specific tunes in this album -- Demetre had not himself heard them at the time -- and the answers confirm that Slim has a first-hand appreciation of boogie woogie backgrounds and feels a kinship to blues pianists of the past. He is extremely knowledgeable in his own world, that of vocal and piano blues, and he was so before he sang at the Alan Lomax Town Hall concert or at the Newport Folk Festival (1959).

The blues environment in which Slim grew up was of the country as well as the city, of the honky-tonks or "juke houses" as well as city night spots closer in atmosphere to the Chicago clubs he later worked in, places such as the Golden Horn or Ralph's Club on West Madison. In terms of music it was a sharing of ideas, then and later, with men who each found his own way and his own work in an area that, to many, seems "just the blues". But John Estes had been lead singer with a track-lining gang, Big Bill sang

blues and other songs around the share-croppers cabins of Mississippi and Arkansas, and Sonny Terry on harmonica wailed the loneliness of the train sounds down near the piney woods of North Carolina. These and other contemporaries of Memphis Slim each had a unique talent but they had in common that they all belonged to the world of the blues.

Peter Chatman (Memphis Slim) was born September 3, 1915, in Memphis, Tennessee. He sang and played piano as a kid and got his first professional job in 1931. His father, also named Peter Chatman, not only sang blues but played piano and guitar and operated "juke houses", those country honky-tonks that borrowed a West African word and gave it, ultimately, to a major American industry, that of the coin-operated phonograph.

Though Slim was largely self-taught, not only was there music in the family but in the tonks -- in many of which he played later on himself -- he could hear pianists, both the little known and the recording piano players, Piano Willie and Piano Slim, Roosevelt Sykes, Little Brother Montgomery and Speckled Red (Rufus Perryman). He also listened, as Flerlage noted, "to the records of Clarence Williams and Leroy Carr along with others popular then, and by the time he was half way through Lester High School he was beginning to be recognized."

During the 1930's the great era of honky-tonk blues in semi-rural areas was dying out -- in many former "juke houses" the piano player was being replaced by the juke box. In 1939 Slim decided to move on and, like many another blues artist, followed the same route north that jazz had followed. That meant Chicago. Memphis, to which he said good-bye, gave him a name and a background in blues. "I left like a late freight," said Slim.

Slim's first record was My Last Pair Of Shoes, made under the name of Peter Chatman and His Washboard Band. His first best-seller, Beer Drinking Woman, (Bluebird) was made with Washboard Sam (Robert Brown). In those years he played string bass, working both as a solo act and as leader of a group consisting of guitar, bass, drums and sometimes saxophone -- but on some early records one musician, possibly unaware of its historic significance, played an American variant of the African earth bow! It wasn't long before Slim was at work in many capacities, as pianist, singer, composer and leader.

"Me and Memphis Slim got to be good friends," said Big Bill Broonzy in the documentary "Big Bill Blues" (Grove Press, 1956). They met soon after Slim came to Chicago and in 1940, after Joshua Altheimer, the pianist working with Broonzy, died, the great contemporary singer of country blues asked Slim to play piano for him.

In Big Bill's warm and human story occurs an anecdote that takes us right out of the honky-tonks and into the lives of blues musicians. Bill introduces it with a bit of biography, in this manner -- "Memphis Slim is six feet six inches tall. He's got a wife and four kids. I have seen his father, too. They have the same name, Peter Chatman, and his older boy has the same name, too. His birthday comes on September 16." (Bill's memory was a little off -- Slim gave his birthdate as September 3rd.) "We would have to outrun him on his birthday because when he would blow out the candles on his cake he would start running out of the house."

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"Once at his party," Bill continued in his book, "we all was trying to catch him and the police thought it was a gang fight. When we caught him the police caught us, too, and was going to put us all in jail. So I talked to them and told them to come in the house with us so we could show them what was going on. So they did and after that Slim told them to sit down, have some drinks and eat some cake while we gave Slim the works."

"There was thirty of us there that day and also Slim's wife, kids and father. Everybody laughed together with the police and after the whipping of Slim we all got a big drink, and started playing music and dancing, girls and boys together."

Some years ago Slim worked with Joe Williams, whose singing of Slim's Every Day is a popular number in the repertoire of the Count Basie Orchestra. And Al Hibbler (famous for his work with Ellington) did some of his early singing with Memphis Slim. "He was blind," Slim recalled, "but he knew the honky-tonks so well he was leading me around!"

Slim respect for oral tradition is reflected in his work, in the sharply-hit treble phrases and tone clusters of Cow Cow Blues, which is partly a tribute to its creator, Cow Cow Davenport, and in Down Home Blues, a pianistic treatment of an old blues melody in which the bass is played in the 19th century slow drag style. This last is a very beautiful blues, sweetness and sadness down to the bone.

Slim is also well aware of the place of blues in jazz. "There would be no jazz without the blues," he told Studs Terkel. "Charlie Parker played it, he understood it, he felt it. Basie plays it. He, too, understands and feels it. As long as a man is bugged by something, he'll be singing the blues."

Jacques Demetre said of Memphis Slim's playing: "He took his inspiration from the blues and boogie woogie piano players like his father, Roosevelt Sykes and Pinetop Smith. At the same time he got ideas from jazz piano players like Fats Waller and even Art Tatum."

"He never studied piano in class or conservatory, but he developed his own technique which is far better than the technique of the average boogie woogie and blues pianists. Ultimately, he tried to play a sort of 'progressive boogie and blues', but staying close to the genuine style of this kind of music. When he came to Chicago in 1939, he was the fastest boogie woogie specialist (except Pete Johnson) and he brought a new style to this music."

In instrumentation boogie woogie is not limited to piano though it was created for the keyboard, probably with guitar and banjo influence - but the primary role of boogie woogie piano is that of a solo instrument, complete in itself. Meade Lux Lewis, essentially a soloist in his art, worked on a famous Bechet date on Blue Note, with Big Sid Catlett on drums. Slim's first record, like his current work on Jay-Vee, was with an instrumental group. In fact, honky-tonk pianists -- and this is the work-a-day basis of instrumentation -- got along with what was at hand. Some tonks could not even underwrite drums and this economic necessity of working solo undoubtedly influenced the creation of boogie woogie, which was geared to solo playing.

Unlike piano rags, boogie woogie seems to have been influenced by jazz bands, though not in as direct a way as was Jelly Roll Morton, who listened with the ear of an orchestral writer and with every intention of going into jazz himself. The boogie woogie creators not only owed most to the blues, they stayed with the blues. (Boogie woogie was in time adapted to jazz orchestral style, e.g. Bob Crosby, Joe Sullivan, Count Basie, etc.) Thus, there is a parallel between two distinct, widely different styles, that of Morton on King Porter Stomp (Commodore) and Memphis Slim's 88 Boogie, even though Jelly's solo was carefully worked out and Slim's is a rough piece improvised in the studio for Folkways. Both reflect, not an orchestral style but an orchestral influence on style. The distinction is important. Albert Ammons, playing his stomps, also achieved a somewhat orchestral structure, (also in blues terms), with or without other instruments in addition to his piano. This aspect of boogie woogie is true mainly of the faster-tempo (rolling bass) style but since it relates to form, is not always in evidence. Many boogie woogie pieces, while completely pianistic and self-contained, do not reflect it.

Just as there is no set way of playing boogie woogie, as to its instrumentation -- though solo piano is the basic one -- so, in this music that in its honky-tonk phase was for listening as well as dancing, there is no insistence upon metronomic tempo. It would seem, however, that the skilled pianist in this art has always a formidable command of the beat. In Down That Big Road, anchored in the bass to what Slim called "the Tennessee beat," there is free use of tempo in the treble (right hand).

The variety of Slim's repertoire is best appreciated as one follows the tracks as they were taped--his own programming. This is not orthodox tracking, which usually is mastered in contrasts of mood and tempo, but a juxtaposition that permits one to enjoy the relationship of one tune to another, or one performance to another. Walkin' The Boogie, the warm-up tune (there was no rehearsal), takes a bow in the direction of Roosevelt Sykes and sets the mood. The next four pieces reflect the type of music heard in "Juke houses".

As he states the melody in chords and employs tremolo in chords, Trouble In Mind -- Richard M. Jones version of an old blues -- assumes a hymn-like quality that will call to mind (to those who know it) Bertha "Chippie" Hill's singing of it, with Louis Armstrong on cornet. After 44 Blues, an old favorite of Sykes, what was more natural than that Slim should improvise 88 Boogie, named for the piano keyboard? Then memories began churning and he brought back for us, "playing" the words on piano, the levee-camp blues that begins, "Sail on, little girl, sail on..."

Another folk blues furnishes the inspiration both for Roll And Tumble and for Slim's piano and vocal masterpiece, Woman Blues Boogie. In the former there is a deliberateness in his style, as though his hands did both his thinking and his playing, that recalls the tactile fingers of Art Tatum. Their styles are, of course, quite dissimilar in other respects and this is a vigorous example of boogie woogie out of blues, right down to the rich fat notes in the bass. On Woman Blues Boogie Slim illustrates the role of the boogie woogie artist as an all-around entertainer, playing piano, singing and speaking interpolated lines. Piano and voice are interwoven and there is a jolt of TNT in the left hand.

Studs Terkel, who has been around the Chicago blues scene long enough to be jaded (but is far from being so,) wrote, "I agree about Slim being altogether fresh and wonderful and underrated." This freshness of approach was apparent in the way he went about preparing this album. "I left him alone for an hour," said Moses Asch, "and he worked out the program. Then he sat down at the piano and went from one piece to another, with only a pause between to look at me and see if the cut was right. Yet the playing of one did not affect the character of the next. This is unusual because with most performers the mind retains the character of the one in the playing of the following one. Often an artist needs a long pause between numbers. With Slim, this wasn't the case. I remember only one other artist who did this -- worked out a program and went right through it without a stop -- Carlos Montoya, the Flamenco guitarist."

Blues pianists are first of all entertainers and for Slim to write (and sing and play) songs in Rhythm and Blues is as natural as it was for Ma Rainey to vary her blues repertoire with topical and novelty songs, and down-home hokum. His breadth of interest, especially in popular music and jazz, is not surprising. "When asked to name his favorite tunes," wrote Raeburn Flerlage, "Slim laughed. 'Maybe you'd better not tell them that!'" (Why not? They are very good songs and two are from blues -- they include September Song, The Very Thought Of You, Summertime and After Hours.)

In his book, Big Bill Broonzy was King of the Blues. Muddy Waters is a close friend and they have strong differences of opinion about music. Among favorite singers are Frank Sinatra, Ray Charles, Herb Lance, Ella Fitzgerald, Nat Cole, Harry Belafonte ("I don't know if you can still call it folk music!"), BB King and Brook Benton. Outside music he admires such varied public figures as Adam Clayton Powell, Liz Taylor, Laraine Day and Congressman Diggs of Illinois.

Slim has, in his own words, a "very understanding" wife. As for those kids Big Bill mentioned, they've grown up a little, and show increasing interest in music. Peter is now (1959) 12, Helen 11, Tyrone 9 and Vivian 6. If a Memphis Slim Quintet develops, you can say you first read it here!

Boogie Woogie Piano

A dynamic tonal art, boogie woogie is difficult to characterize but once heard is forever and easily recognizable. Apart from its surging vitality its most striking characteristic is the rapid, incessant bass rhythm, usually of a jerky, rolling nature (a rhythm of dotted 8th and 16ths) which produces its high-balling drive and serves as the structural basis for its whopping of the beat, its incredible swing. Indicative of its growth out of blues, in boogie woogie the piano is treated primarily as a percussion instrument.

One of the most amazing statements heard about boogie woogie of the 1930's was that it was "all alike". This is like saying that Chinese music is "all alike," or, to bring it closer to home, to say that of the blues, of which boogie woogie piano is one aspect! Boogie woogie differs according to the musician playing it and the type of number being played. Like Jimmy Yancey, the grand old man of boogie woogie, Memphis Slim on slow numbers plays a piano that is less percussive than usual and richer in tonality -- this is particularly true of the plaintive, deeply moving Down Home Blues.

In certain tunes of this set Slim pays tribute, in knowing nuance, to the styles of men who created them or whose playing of them was notable. For these men and for Slim, boogie woogie piano was not merely a honky-tonk style, dissociated from their private lives. In fact it was sometimes called "party piano" and it furnished music for the parlor social; the midwest equivalent of the Harlem rent party. At the same time, its practitioners usually made a living playing it in honky-tonks and in good-time flats.

The way in which the term came to be applied to piano will bear re-telling. Etymologically, this, like other words in jazz jargon, appears to reflect both European and African influences. Be that as it may, the use of the term itself was made explicit by Pine Top Smith on an old white-label Vocalion (reissued, Brunswick). In the way of blues this boogie woogie interpretation, in which Pine Top talked over the music, served as the pattern for many similar "on-the-job" recordings -- the most recent direct product of this inspiration was a rock and roll piece from Texas called The Double Freeze!

Back there in the 1920's Pine Top Smith, giving stop, turn and twist cues to the "little girl with the red dress on," wanted everyone to know "This is Pine Top's Boogie Woogie." What he meant was that this was his music for a dance called boogie woogie. But he really got things rolling that day in a Chicago recording studio (December 29, 1928)! Ever since then boogie woogie has been the term identifying blues piano with a figured bass, whether walking bass -- four to the bar -- or rolling bass -- eight to the bar. In many of Slim's pieces, as in Pine Top's, the familiar rhythmic accent before the 4th beat lend what musicians (such as Jelly) called "the Spanish" influence -- with equal justification, as we know now, it could have been called "the African" one:

As Pine Top's demonstration implies, boogie woogie, originally and specifically, was a dance. (The boogie became a sub-style in the Lindy Hop tradition as Rock and Roll came on the scene) Musicians and jazz fans "picked up" on the term boogie woogie, applying it to any blues piano with an ostinato bass. In the era of orchestral swing, the term was found to be commercially exploitable. The use of this type of bass was very old in Negro American folk music and was not borrowed from concert music. Many types of walking bass were used in blues in the 19th century. More recently, in this century, Clarence Williams and James P. Johnson recorded examples of it early in the 1920's and Scott Joplin had long before that incorporated a slow drag in a ragtime operetta.

Just when the faster and more characteristic "boogie bass" developed is something of a mystery. The best guess is that it was developing most forcefully in the 1920's, though the use of fast bass probably dates much earlier than this. Slapped and plucked string bass in jazz dates back at least to the 1890's and this could, conceivably, have been yet another influence, especially since crude adaptations of early jazz bands went into the more affluent honky-tonks and -- as this writer learned from Willy Cornish -- the Bolden band itself played in a barrel-house called Nancy Hanks' Saloon. (In a part of New Orleans where Emancipation Day was the big holiday, this conveyed no disrespect.) The blues pianists were particularly identified with the tonks in working-class districts the Red Onion in New Orleans was a pay-off place for longshoremen and railroad workers -- and one is not surprised to find distinguished names in boogie woogie associated with Birmingham, Pittsburgh and Detroit. And it seems to have flourished, like jazz itself, in the 20th century expansion of the mid-west and Southwest.

Bass figures were sometimes known by locale, e.g. West Texas roll, Detroit Rocks, the latter a title by Montana Taylor. Cow Cow Davenport, who played in Birmingham honky-tonks and in the mining sections of the state -- he was also the first boogie woogie pianist to play before royalty on a European trip! -- got his nickname from his most famous number, Cow Cow Blues, which Slim plays in this album. This is a train piece with a walking bass. The title refers to the cow-catcher of a train that, when it worked, cleared the tracks of cows -- a curdling thought!

St. Louis, Memphis and Kansas City were all on the itinerary of the blues pianists but Chicago, where Paramount and Vocalion records were made -- the population of its South Side swollen by the industrial boom of World War I -- became identified with boogie woogie piano more than any other city. (Kansas City, more than any other, carried it into its multi-instrumental, or jazz, phase.) Actually, only a few of the great boogie woogie artists were born there. But it was natural that piano players should drift to Chicago for, though companies sent out sound equipment, most discs were made in large city studios, notably Chicago and New York. In Chicago the boogie woogie pianists played on the South Side, until the depression sent them to washing cars and doing similar non-musical chores, but, meanwhile, they had recorded exceptional examples of the new style of blues piano and had employed this style in accompaniments to singers.

One could hardly ask for a more precise description of boogie woogie than that of William Russell in "The Jazz Record Book" Smith & Durrell, 1942. Although I edited all copy this quotation, almost word-for-word, is by Mr. Russell, as those who know his work in jazz criticism will recognize. C.E.S. "An analysis of the musical elements of boogie woogie style adds little to an understanding of its magic. Rhythmically more simple than some types of African music, it is still much more complex and polyrhythmic than the conventional jazz piano style. The rapid, hypnotic patterns of the left hand are often set against ever-changing rhythms of the right hand, causing the most exciting cross-rhythms. And one should also call attention to the swing of boogie woogie, the lack of which makes imitations of it -- though played in excellent tempo -- so monotonous and ineffectual. The swing of a pianist such as Jimmy Yancey is a constant factor; musical definition is combined with a fluid rhythm, exciting and unpredictable.

"Melodically built of short scale figures with many repeated notes and phrases emphasizing its economy of material, the boogie style is nevertheless more chromatic than ordinary blues. The most common motif seems to be a three-note descending scale passage; at times the melody for an entire chorus is built around one note. The usual rhythm employed in this form of variation consists of a full chord struck on the first beat and before the fourth beat of each measure. In addition to this fundamental rhythm we find the dotted 8th used almost as commonly in the right hand as in the bass. Since this was also the principle rhythm of pianistic ragtime, it can hardly be considered the determining characteristic of boogie woogie. The tremolo is a frequently used device and has a percussive and rhythmic function primarily, rather than a tone sustaining use as in so-called trumpet style piano.

"Boogie woogie takes almost without exception the form of the 12-bar blues, repeated with endless variation but always in the same key and, like most blues, the harmony is principally tonic and dominant. However, there is no attempt at four-part harmony and emphasis is often on the contrapuntal, with frequently two parts used. In such a case the melody may be widely separated from the bass and progress in a contrary motion. Throughout, an ignorance of conventional harmony allows for a complete disregard of copybook rules. Thus we find again in boogie woogie the harmonic freedom of the blues."

And the following should be of special interest to jazz musicians, and, indeed, all musicians who have some knowledge of the blues tradition. "It would be as incorrect," continues Mr. Russell, "to approach blues and boogie woogie through the Western European musical conventions dominating most of our popular music as it would be to assay a characteristic work of Debussy's on its relationship to the dionysian scale. Although the inflexibility of the piano keyboard precludes the use of the lowered 3rd and 7th of the blues scale, the right hand melody often has complete freedom from the left hand chords. The bounds of orthodox harmony are also extended by frequent use of chromaticism and dissonance produced by full-handed tone clusters."

Further Remarks On Titles

Since information about titles is included in the main text of the introduction, little need be added. Slim's sympathetic playing of Cow Cow Blues suggests the explosive keyboard style of its creator. Jefferson County is named for the Missouri county in which St. Louis is located. This section was famous amongst blues piano players because of the "road houses" around St. Louis. Four O'Clock Blues is a type of blues played by Slim's father. Mister Freddie was inspired by a piano player of the 1920's. Trouble In Mind is related to the same folk source as Jelly Roll's Mamie's Blues (the first blues he heard in his life). Little Brother Montgomery played a variant of 44 Blues, though Roosevelt Sykes' treatment was the best known. Slim believes that this special and original style of playing was created by a man called Ernest "Forty-Four". The lyrics, not sung on this record, involve a faithless woman and a 44-calibre pistol. (Mr. Demetre recalled that this style was also used by Big Maceo Merriweather on 32-20 Blues.) Sail On is a sweet little tune, one familiar to Slim since childhood, and he "plays" the words with affectionate nostalgia. His way of playing Down Home Blues suggests the style, at its best, of oldtime blues pianists who worked in barrelhouses and tonks of Negro sections of the South. Down That Big Road was suggested by a blues his aunt, Ethel Rogers, sang and played:

"I can't go down that big road by myself,
If I can't take my baby, don't want nobody else..."

And of course Roll and Tumble, as you might guess, is related to Woman Blues Boogie:

"I rolled and I tumbled
And I cried the whole night long..."

Crowing Rooster takes part of its lyric from an old and famous blues recorded by Lonnie Johnson in 1928 under this same title. The verses, as accurately as they could be transcribed without running the tape unduly, are:

What makes the rooster crow every morning before day?
Do you know what makes the rooster crow every morning
before day?

To let a playboy know that the workingman is on his
way.

Man, you can't never tell what a woman got on her
mind (2)
You think she crazy about you and the gal be leavin'
you all the time.

I thought my eyes were wide open, somehow or 'nother
I was fast asleep-- (2)
My gal had a man upstairs and one downstairs and
one across the street.

Bye bye, I guess I'll be on my way (3)
I guess I'll never be lucky--women will always have
their say.

Memphis Slim created his Woman Blues Boogie many
years ago. It is a fine example of the art of the
boogie woogie singer-pianist-entertainer:

I walked all night long 'til my feet got soakin'
wet (2)
It's two o'clock in the morning and I aint found
my baby yet.

Wish I could find my baby before the sun come up (2)
Boy, if I don't find her, there's gonna be some
stuff.

Following lines interpolated (spoken) while playing:

I don't know what's the matter with that woman...
I been walkin' all night, boy, tryin' to find her...
God knows-- I love that woman-- she just won't do right.

Anybody see my baby, tell her I say hurry home (2)
'Cause I been blue and lonesome ever since the little
girl's been gone.

I roll and I tumble and I cry all night long (2)
When I woke up this morning, I couldn't tell right
from wrong.

Here come my baby, she makes me feel so bad, (2)
But I love her so much some way, boy, that just
made me mad.

NOTES ON THE BLUES

by JACQUES DEMETRE, editor of "Le Jazz Hor"

Without a doubt, one of the most powerful and original
art forms created in the United States is "the blues".
Everything about the blues is remarkable: the simple
and strange beauty of the melodic lines coming from
the field-hollers sung by the Negro workers in the
southern states, the logical and admirable combination
of the European chords and the old African scales,
and the wonderful and spontaneous folk poetry of the
blues lyrics. "The Blues" are interesting not only
for art lovers and musicologists, but also for the
sociologist who can find in the words of the blues
a reflection of the social and environmental conditions
of American Negro life.

Everyone interested in the blues knows of their origi-
nation by the Negroes living in the southern states.
Through the country blues, we get the background of
the field workers (mule skinnners) still close to the
original work songs. After the migration of the
Negroes to northern towns like Chicago, Detroit
and New York, the blues repertoire changed - describ-
ing the journey, the arrival and the new life; songs
of the hoboes, for instance, were born. The City
Blues are as soulful and plaintive as the southern
blues. One of the most beautiful and pathetic
ever composed is "Going Down Slow" by St. Louis
Jimmy; it tells the story of one of the migrants
to the north who lived too fast:

I have had my fun,
Though I don't get well no more (2)
My health is failing me
And I'm going down slow.

On the next train South
Look for my clothes on (2)
And if you don't see my body
All you can do is moan.

I don't intend to write a complete, or even a short
history of the blues. I would prefer to introduce
my personal experience in the field of the blues.
I live in Paris, which is far from the country of
the blues, but I am intensely interested in this
art. Why? I am asked this question very often.
Yes indeed, why are so many people in Europe so
deeply interested in the blues and in Negro folk-
lore? The answer is hard to give, and is also not
the purpose of these notes. But, in a few words,
I can say that one of the reasons can be found,
perhaps, is the fact that our art in the European
countries is too intellectualized, too "classical,"
too far from the foundations of folk art.

On the other hand, folk art is dying in France
because classical art is too important and does
not allow any room for the originality and life of
folk art. That is why so many people try to
search for the roots of the human being in the
popular arts of other countries. Some find them
in African sculpture (remember the fashion of the
"Art Negre" at the beginning of the century?);
others find them in American pre-Columbian art,
and so on; and some find them in the Negro blues.

But collecting and listening to records -- which
is almost the only way to know the blues in Europe
-- is not enough for a real understanding of this
art. Folklore lovers should know the conditions
of life of the people whose art they study; they
must see them and, if necessary, live with them.
That is the reason why I decided in the year 1959
to come to the United States and to try to meet
some of the blues artists whom I knew only from
their names on cold record labels.

I had had opportunities, previously, to meet some
blues singers and musicians when they were in Europe;
artists like Big Bill Broonzy, Brother John Sellers,
Big Joe Turner, Sammy Price, Pete Johnson, Larry
Dale, Brownie McGhee, Sonny Terry; but as fine as
these artists were, that was not enough for me,
because I was missing something important -- their
daily lives and environment.

I had been told that many blues singers live in Chicago,
even more than in New York. I just had time to make
the acquaintance of the blues singer and pianist,
Champion Jack Dupree; as a result of living at his
home, I had, from the first hour of my arrival, a fas-
cinating contact with Negro life of that city.

Before going to Chicago, I planned to stop in Detroit, where an important section of the Negro population lives. I did not regret my stop in the "Motor City." After seeing the famous Hastings Street, in the heart of the Negro section, I understood why many northern Negroes still sing the blues. Slums and old houses, miserable alleyways coming down to the street, give an unforgettable picture of what one could call the "Underground America." I understood how the blues singers can sing such lyrics as:

Blues is like my shadow
Follows me wherever I go.

In fact, many blues singers live in Detroit, where they work in clubs for a mostly, if not exclusively, Negro public. Surprisingly, it was in this highly industrialized city that I heard of a strange Negro beggar nicknamed "One String Sam," who plays in the streets with a sort of self-made guitar which has only one string. It was in this city that I found and met one of the most primitive (from a musical point of view) and, I would say, African, blues singers, John Lee Hooker. Some other young men living in Detroit still sing and play the blues, men like Washboard Willie, Little Sonny Willis, Eddie Broms, Little Eddie Kirkland, etc.

The next stop was Chicago, the city of which the blues singers speak so often. "Going to Chicago," sings Jimmy Rushing, hopefully, while Kokomo Arnold moans, to the contrary, on one of the records he cut in the thirties:

Since I'm here in Chicago,
I'm catchin' a-plenty hell.

So the question came to my mind: What is this enigmatic city and what is its meaning in Negro life in the States. One thing I knew was that one million Negroes were living in the South and West Side of Chicago, the "Windy City." I was especially interested in meeting such people as Memphis Slim one of the finest singers and piano-players of the blues. When I was in New York, Moses Asch had asked me to complete some information on the record made by Memphis Slim for Folkways. I saw him and many others. I spent practically all my time in the South Side of Chicago and I shall try to give a real picture of what I saw.

The blues singers now living in Chicago can be classified into three categories: the forgotten blues singers of the past; the old-timers or semi-old-timers who are still active in the musical field; the young singers whose musical careers have just begun or began a few years ago. Among the old-timers whose careers are over (or almost over unless a "blues revival" starts in this country) I met Tampa Red, Curtis Jones, Red Nelson and Kokomo Arnold. The latter now works in a steel mill in Belwood near Chicago.

Even if they are not starving, the lives of these old-time blues men are really pathetic from a psychological point of view. They, who were making so many records and entertaining wide Negro audiences, have stopped their musical careers and now go gradually to the sad shadow of the forgotten people whose art does not have the recognition it deserves. Why? I found the reason in the fact that the Negroes in the Northern cities -- and I guess in the Southern towns as well -- no longer want the old style blues. They still want the blues, but they ask for some changes in their folk art; nobody can blame them for that. For instance, they no longer enjoy the natural "old-fashioned" guitar of the first blues specialists

and they are looking for the electric guitar. They need a solid after-beat in the music they hear and they do not find it in the old records of Big Bill Broonzy, Johnny Temple or Tampa Red. On the other hand, the Negro masses forget very quickly the old artists and other things of the past. Some of the old-timers were able to survive as artists, like Big Bill Broonzy before he died, by playing for white people who realized the value of the art or who were simply interested by one of the aspects of "American folk music."

"I'll bet anything you want that if I put some records of Blind Lemon Jefferson or Big Bill Broonzy for sale in my shop," said Joe Von Battle, owner of a shop on Hastings Street in Detroit, "I would keep them till the end of my life." He was right. I could verify this statement after many talks with blues singers and, in general, with many Negroes.

But happily, some old-timers, or semi-old-timers, still keep the favor of the Negro audience in Chicago. Among these are Memphis Slim, Sunnyland Slim, Little Brother Montgomery, St. Louis Jimmy, Muddy Waters, Eddie Boyd, Howlin' Wolf and Elmore James, although the last two started their recording careers only in 1950. Why are they still active? It is because they could adapt their playing and singing to the actual tastes of the Negroes.

If we take the example of Memphis Slim, we can see that although he is one of the most superb pianists specializing in the blues and in boogie-woogie (which is just one of the forms of the traditional blues), for his records he uses a very good electric guitar player by the name of Matthew Murphy, who just formed his own combo -- and Slim gives him almost all the solo parts. But his solid and rich playing, with his effective walking basses, gives to his band a strong background and a tremendous beat.

If I add to these old-timers, the new generation of the blues, I think I will have given a complete picture of the blues in Chicago. Some of these names are already familiar to blues lovers: Little Walter, J. B. Lenoir, Otis Rush, James Cotton, Buddy Guy, Little George, Big Walter, Eddie Taylor, Little Sonny Cooper, and Pat Hare (one of the best of the blues guitarists).

One of the main impressions which emerges from all this is the hard competition which exists between the blues artists. This competition is due, in part, to the fact (which is also true of Detroit and New York) that the blues men are really the "underground artists" of the United States. Not only do the white people ignore them, but practically nobody in American Negro "High Society" cares for them. The result is that their stories and photos almost never appear in the Negro newspapers or magazines unless they achieve national fame, like B. B. King, whose music is polite and elaborate enough to please Negro society.

Most of the blues singers live in poor houses of the Negro sections. Briefly, they are just Negroes among other Negroes; everybody knows what that means in America. But at the same time, being unknown by the whites, they instinctively preserve their art and keep it unspoiled, although I cannot say they have no contact with the white world, since most all of them have television sets and some like all types of music.

One final point to conclude these notes. It is amazing to see that so many young Negroes still strongly maintain the tradition of the real blues instead of playing jazz or variety. Many Negroes in Chicago and Detroit (less in New York) come from the South, and they still love the blues. Many Northern Negroes, on the other hand, dislike the blues (or say that they dislike the blues) and even reject this music as a symbol of slavery days. But others still like the blues and are not ashamed by the roots of their life. The result is that a large proportion of Negroes, especially in the West Side of Chicago, where many Southerners live, still enjoy the blues; I mean the modern blues, also called "Rhythm and Blues." This modern form of the blues is not only played by orchestras, but by small combos too, some of them consisting only of an harmonica with the rhythm section (like the Muddy Waters band). I can say that this last form of the blues is very impressive and exciting. It sounds like the genuine old country blues coming from the South, but with a modern touch which appeals to the young Negroes. Even on electric guitar, the new bluesmen deliver an unspoiled and uncommercialized blues; and on their amplified harmonicas, people like Little Walter, James Cotton, Little Sonny, Junior Wells, Howlin' Wolf, produce one of the greatest sounds ever heard in the blues idiom.

The singing of the modern bluesmen is as full of emotion and warmth as that of the previous generation. To see a Negro audience listen to these blues specialists is something which is difficult to forget. I've been in ten or twelve clubs, even the roughest, and I saw the same thing: the listeners move and "swing" their bodies even when they do not dance; sometimes their eyes are closed and their mouths hum the words sung by the singers. Then, suddenly, some especially strong and appealing lyrics make the audience shout or wave their hands: "Yes, that's right man," "Yeah man," "Talk, talk talk," are the shouts you can hear among the Negroes listening to their singer. The lyrics have a very important meaning and many listeners follow each word that is sung very carefully. These words reflect their own lives and they understand deeply the singer who cries:

"If you ever been mistreated,
You know what I am talking about."

Another surprising thing to a European blues lover is learning that the American folklorists who enjoy listening to the old-timers like Leadbelly or Big Bill Broonzy, don't pay any attention to the new bluesmen. They consider that these young bluesmen sing and play only "rock and roll." It is true that this form of music, taken by white singers from the "Rhythm and Blues" is only a noisy and tasteless

version of the blues. It is true that some -- not all -- young Negroes try sometimes -- not always -- to copy the white artists and to add to their music some of the gimmicks of "Rock and Roll." But even, I think that these Negro artists still express the blues. Does the fact that Lightnin' Hopkins plays with a drummer who accentuates the after-beat make him lose his sense of the blues? All the artists I interviewed told me that they play just the "down home and low down blues" which will never die. It's roots are too deep and too strong to be rubbed out easily.

A last point. As among all human beings, I found among the blues singers all sorts of characters; some of them are very nice and act friendly, some are tough. But I must say that the majority of them were very kind to me. They welcomed me and helped me in my research. With these last words, I want to thank them for all the pleasure they give with their wonderful music and behavior. Memphis Slim himself is a very interesting personality and has big qualities. He is very agreeable and pleasant; he likes to talk about his art and the origins of blues and boogie-woogie. I wish that he has the popularity and success which he deserves for a long time to come.