

**Memphis Slim And The Real Honky Tonk**  
**Piano Solos With Vocal**  
**Folkways Records FG 3535**

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# Memphis Slim And The Real Honky Tonk

## Piano Solos With Vocal

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The Bells  
The Lord Have Mercy On Me  
My Baby Don't Love Me No More  
I Left That Town (Harlem Bound)  
Boogie After Midnight  
The Train Is Gone  
Pinetop Boogie  
Whiskey Drinking Blues  
In The Evening  
How Long Blues  
Sail On Little Girl  
John Henry

# Memphis Slim and the Honky-Tonk Sound

by Charles Edward Smith

In the person of a lanky, ingratiating entertainer in contemporary blues and boogie woogie, the honky-tonk sounds are moving into the jazz "rooms" of Chicago and other cities of the United States and Canada. The man winning new fame for himself and for boogie woogie is Peter Chatman, known as Memphis Slim. His voice and piano are among the most articulate in the blues-jazz field. Slim has a new sound, often a happy sound, and when he sings the old songs he gives them the flavor of today. For all his native exuberance he brings taste and distinction to an area of music in which the slick and sloppy have become all too common.

During an informal taping session in which only one tune, San Juan Blues, was sung and played in response to a request, a pattern of honky-tonk blues and boogie woogie emerged. After a warm-up, an ear-opener called The Bells, Slim barreled right into The Lord Have Mercy On Me:

"Everybody cryin' 'Mercy!' -- I wonder what do they mean,  
Well, if it means 'Little girl,'--Lord, have mercy on me."

And there you have the number one honky-tonk theme--sex! It is looked at, laughed at, cried at, and seen from angles Kinsey never dreamed of. To be sure, a blues lyric of this nature is sometimes merely a prop on which to hang a tune or a style. With Slim, however, even if he is using non-narrative stanzas (without a story sequence) the choice of stanzas is infrequently random.

Though the honky-tonk blues could be, and often were, in deadly earnest (and of a personal nature), their appeal went beyond this. Sail On, Little Girl is a lonely little song and one feels it's the loneliness of the little girl who went away-- though she wasn't at all a good little girl -- as well as that of the singer. The simplicity of the lyric is most effective.

The juke joints, the old-time rural honky-tonks, are juke box joints today; live talent is seldom heard in them. In large towns and cities the honky-tonks have become night clubs. Though much the same in character, they cater to people with more money to spend and with somewhat different values - for each of us, in his own way, has a sense of status. Really good blues began to be appreciated once

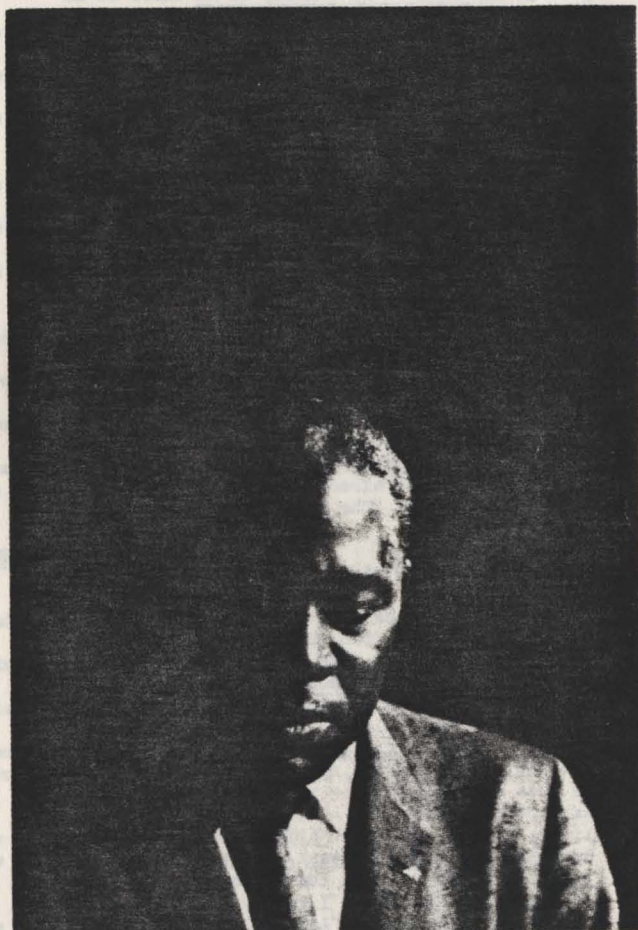


photo by Raeburn Flerlage

again not merely because of the leveling operation called rock and roll but because blues have prestige. Their contribution to jazz is now universally recognized and, thanks to phonograph records, the name of Memphis Slim is known throughout the world. In fact, there have been more articles about him in French and English magazines than in those of the United States.

Through the years the nature of this type of entertainment has changed. There are fewer rough and rowdy songs in the blues and boogie woogie

fare of today than there were in the 1930's. But the impact is much the same. A blues lyric may use somewhat innocuous language and still get its message across. And of course many of the low-down blues are still sung, and enjoyed. An example of a blues that was really rough is Whiskey Drinking Blues. In his handling of it-- and this, too, is characteristic of a style of boogie woogie -- Slim accompanies the raw emotion of the lyric with delicate phrases on piano and with a moving, dramatic bass. At times, slow rolls have something of the effect of tone clusters and this blues device is reflected in the treble.

"I Think the words as I play," Slim once remarked ("The Real Boogie Woogie" Folkways) and certainly few singers are so adept in creating an appropriate piano style for a specific blues. His blues and boogie woogie devices are seldom used in quite the same way from piece to piece. At times the piano part is unusually full - resulting, with the voice, in a curiously concerto-like texture, though of course in a strictly blues media. On My Baby Don't Love Me No More, with the last stanza, there occurs an example of a "modern" sound in boogie woogie. Slim has his own harmonic ideas and they are usually good ones. And in a solo piano passage in The Lord Have Mercy On Me there is an original approach to the melodic line, neither old-style boogie woogie nor linear jazz.

In his most recent visit to Folkways Memphis Slim gave us an hour or so of his night club, concert and radio repertoire, virtually without interruption. If the singing of the lyric had too cold a sound or the piano wasn't grooving up to Slim's standard the tape ran on-- it could be eliminated later. He didn't stop to do any "2nd masters," -- as they used to be called when all this was on wax. This meant that some nice tunes had to be left out, but that still left plenty for an album and a half. So Folkways settled for an album.

With the exception of San Juan Blues these titles are from his current repertoire. The exception was in answer to a request for an example of a Spanish-type bass identified with blues piano in Memphis. Slim wasn't notably enthusiastic until he remembered San Juan Blues which, he explained, was very popular in Memphis and was already an old style when he himself was young. The verses are typical of those sung with it.

A favorite display piece for boogie woogie artists is a number based on bells or chimes. Even George Shearing, the jazz pianist who taught himself boogie woogie from phonograph records as a youngster in England, had one, which he called, appropriately, Big Ben Boogie. In this style the notes are struck percussively, like hammers on a xylophone. The Bells is Slim's contribution to the art, and his right hand is in fine fettle. He doesn't always hit the notes quite cleanly-- instead, he puts a little blue on them, making them sound as though he hits them on the edges; he puts a little English on them! Although Slim's left hand doesn't have to take a back seat in any company-- it's one of the best in the business-- his right hand is something special. "I really think the right hand is my hand," he said. "I'd call it an 'educated' right hand." To which we'd say, "Summa cum Memphis!"

In the tonks and taverns where Slim learned his trade, one man and a piano often had to be the whole show-- songs, patter, blues piano, music for dancing -- and it went on without a break, into the small hours of the morning. A virtuoso piece such as The Bells caught the attention -- later on the mood would be right for a very blue piano solo -- but the immediate order of business was to get the listeners with him, to give them an emotional jolt. Slim does just this as he wallows the beat with:

"Somebody cryin' 'Mercy!' --I wonder what do they mean..."

His listeners know the answer, and so does Slim, but he sings it with fresh vigour, and the piano has a surprise or two of its own.

Following some gloomy thoughts and bright piano on My Baby Don't Love Me No More, Slim relates, in the course of his next number, the story of a traveling man in a honky-tonk town (East St. Louis, Illinois). I Left That Town (Harlem Bound) reflects a common sentiment of the 1930's and 1940's. The jump boogie tempo in which it is played, became popular in those years, too. This one supplied music for dancing and still does, sometimes.

After midnight the blues joints came to life. The crowd was raucous, noisy and high on hooch-- it took a good piano player to hold his own. Slim plays Boogie After Midnight briskly, though in moderate tempo, with powerful accents. There is strong definition in the bass and, as often happens, he creates his own color in the harmony.

Usually, by this time, the audience was with him, though the talk didn't always come to a full stop. And chances are, Slim responded to their voluble ardor with a shouting, stomping tune such as The Train Is Gone. In this exuberant and original train piece not the least of its excitement is in the skill with which imitative sounds are interwoven. Bell-like tones become part of the music's texture as he sings:

"The porter waved his hand and the fireman rang the bell."

After the line in which occur the words, "the drivers began to roll," his rhythmic bass suggests the propulsive roll of the "drivers" (locomotive wheels). Then, as background for the next stanza, he develops this motif in a completely pianistic fashion.

If you're a veteran jazz collector you may own a copy of Pine Top Smith's historic record of his own boogie woogie and blues. If you're a young listener familiar with rhythm and blues, you've probably heard Al Brown and The Tune Toppers and Madison Time, the most recent treatment - of many - based on the same idea. Slim does the original piece, and combines the vocal blues and the boogie woogie with dance calls, as Pine Top must have done many times at parties and in honky-tonks. Which brings the tune full circle, for it's been heard in almost every conceivable musical guise. It's that kind of tune.

Though Slim plays Pine Top's Boogie in his own way, he has the technical skill and musical sensitivity to adapt unique aspects of Pine Top's style that lend distinction to the latter's recording of the 1920's. He plays it with a plaintive tonality and gives it an easy rock that eludes most pianists-- for this is both a rolling and a buoyant bass. The "calls" for the boogie woogie dance are interpolated with complete naturalness-- one can almost visualize the girl being addressed!

The verses of Whiskey Drinking, like those of Pine Top's Blues, (incorporated in Pine Top's Boogie) belong in style to an older era of blues, hard words for a hard life! On the next number, San Juan Blues, the distinctive feature, the Spanish-type bass, was usually called that by pianists in Memphis and in New Orleans as well. This type of bass doesn't come from recent Latin American influences but dates from the last century.

For a ballad-like number, and one not lacking in schmaltz and sentiment, Slim chose When The Sun Goes Down. If you've been to a barefoot bash at your local temple of culture, you've no doubt heard it. Woody Guthrie, Huddie Ledbetter, Pete Seeger and many others sang versions of it. It's about as good a choice as one could make for a song representative of its type.

When Samuel Charters ("The Country Blues" Rinehart) stopped off in Nashville to ask about the composer of How Long Blues, a bystander commented, "Wouldn't that surprise you, somebody asking about Leroy?" But if Leroy Carr is little known in his home town, his How Long Blues is known wherever the blues are known.

Its form is unusual, the last line being a refrain, usually repeated at the close of each stanza. Its

lovely melody and the simplicity of the lyric are what make it memorable. Slim sings it in a direct, unaffected manner (much as Leroy Carr did) and the tremelo behind the voice is played with taste. In the opening section there occurs a haunting melodic-harmonic relationship between treble and bass.

Another fine blues -- and the best blues have uniqueness-- is afforded the listener in Slim's moving interpretation of Sail On, Little Girl. In mood, this is close to How Long Blues, though the lyric is nearer the traditional in form. The lines are resolved in a classic blues style:

"Sail on, sail on, little girl, sail on --  
Well, I don't mind your sailing, long (as) you don't  
sail too long."

There is a lazy rock to the rhythm as Memphis Slim sings his interpretation of John Henry. If it is well sung, as it is here, one never tires of the poetry in this folk saga:

"John Henry hammered in the mountain  
Until his hammer caught on fire,  
Well, the last word I heard the poor boy say,  
'I want a cool drink of water before I die...'"

From Slim's version one may assume that John Henry's love life was not slighted in honky-tonk tributes to his fame. And Polly Ann who "drove steel like a man" was seldom in better company than with Memphis Slim of Memphis and Chicago.

#### SIDE I

##### Band 1: THE BELLS (Piano Solo)

##### Band 2: THE LORD HAVE MERCY ON ME

Everybody cryin' "Mercy!" I wonder what do mercy  
mean,  
Everybody cryin' "Mercy!" Please tell me what do  
mercy mean?  
Lawdy if it means any good, Oh Lawd, have mercy  
on me.

I thought my eyes was wide open, she thought that  
I was fast asleep,  
I thought my eyes was wide open, she thought that  
I was fast asleep,  
My woman had a maid upstairs and one downstairs  
and one right across the street.

##### Band 3: MY BABY DON'T LOVE ME NO MORE

My baby, my baby, don't love me no more,  
My baby, my baby, don't love me no more,  
Lawdy to keep down trouble, I b'lieve I better  
go home.

You know I love ya baby and I tell the whole round  
world I do,  
You know I love my little baby, I tell the whole  
round world I do,  
But just the way you treat me, it's gonna come  
back to you.

You know faithful always, you know two times ain't  
but twice,  
You know faithful as always, you know two times  
ain't but twice,  
But if you get someone to love you, you will learn  
how to treat them right.

That's all I got to say, well I guess I'll be on  
my way,  
That's all I got to say, well I guess I'll be on  
my way,  
But you're gonna long for me baby, some ole'  
rainy day.

##### Band 4: I LEFT THAT TOWN (HARLEM BOUND)

Started out in Memphis in 19 and 32, playin' a little  
blues and a little boogie too,

But I left that town, yes, I left that town,  
Lawd I left dear old Memphis, ya know I'm Harlem  
bound.

I came to East St. Louis in 19 and 34, the girls down  
there didn't wanna let me go,  
But I left that town, yes, I left that town,  
I left dear ole' East St. Louis, ya know I'm Harlem  
bound, Harlem bound.

Now I'm in Chicago, doin' mighty fine, still has  
Harlem on my mind,  
I'm gonna leave this town, gonna leave this town,  
Leavin' ole' Chicago, ya know I'm Harlem bound,  
Harlem bound.

##### Band 5: BOOGIE AFTER MIDNIGHT (Piano Solo)

##### Band 6: THE TRAIN IS GONE

The train is comin' my baby's gotta go,  
The train is comin' and my baby's gotta go,  
She makes me think she's leavin', not to come back  
no more.

I stood and looked at the train, until it went  
around the bend,  
I stood and looked at the train, until it went  
around the bend,  
Gee, but I just don't believe I'll see her smilin'  
face again.

The porter wave his hand and the fireman ring the  
bell,  
The porter wave his hand and the fireman he ring  
the bell,  
And when that drivin' wheel start turnin' over,  
my poor heart begin to swell.

There she goes!

I believe I'll go and sit down under that old oak  
tree,  
I believe I'll go and sit down under that old oak  
tree,  
Because I ain't got nobody to talk baby-talk to me.  
The train is gone!

#### SIDE II

##### Band 1: PINETOP'S BOOGIE

I know you folks have all heard the Pinetop Boogie  
Woogie,  
This here's the Pinetop way to do the Pinetop  
Boogie Woogie,  
When I tell ya ta stop, I want everybody to hold it--  
When I tell you to boogie, I want you to break your  
leg.

Now stop! Bore yourselves!  
Now boogie! That's what I'm talkin' about, Look  
'ere!

Now swing that woman with the red dress on,  
Bring her over and listen to the Pinetop,  
Let her sit down on the piano,  
Yeah babe, we'll boogie all night long--One more  
time now:

Boogie! Yahnuis! I' wanna tell ya somethin' now:

My gal got a heart like a rock cast in the sea,  
I said my gal got a heart like a rock, cast in  
the sea,  
She can love everybody and mistreat poor me.

Well I cooked her breakfast, even carried it to  
her bed,  
Well I cooked her breakfast, even carried it to  
her bed,  
She would take one bite, throw it to me back at  
Pinetop Inn.

I don't want no woman, if she can't help me to rob  
and steal,

I don't want no woman, if she can't help me to rob  
and steal,  
You're liable to wake up every mornin' and you won't  
have a decent meal.

Well I combed her hair, even manicured her finger-  
nails,  
Well I combed her hair, even manicured her finger-  
nails,  
And everytime I get in trouble, she let's me go  
to jail.

Bore yourself! Take it easy! Ah! Slow n' easy,  
that's the way it goes!

#### Band 2: WHISKEY DRINKING BLUES

Whiskey and blues sho' God, got to drive me wild,  
Whiskey and blues sho' God, got to drive me wild,  
I've been treated so bad, wished I'd a died when  
I's a child.

'Cause I'm a whiskey-drinkin' boy, nobody don't  
want me around,  
'Cause I'm a whiskey-drinkin' boy, nobody don't  
want me around,  
I've got no place to go, six feet in the cold,  
cold, ground.

Whiskey and blues, I don't know which one to choose,  
Whiskey and blues, dunno which one I'd ruther  
choose,  
No mind about my whiskeyin' the blues keep me  
confused.

#### Band 3: SAN JUAN BLUES

Pack my suitcase I'll be on my way,  
Gonna pack my suitcase I'll be on my way,  
Gotta find my baby, leavin' town today.

Leavin' in the mornin', sure do hate to go,  
Leavin' town in the mornin', sure do hate to go,  
But they tell me my baby, she down by Mexico.

Bye-bye people, I'll be on my way,  
Good-bye, I'll be on my way,  
Gotta find my baby, I'm leavin' town today.

#### Band 4: IN THE EVENING

In the evenin', in the evenin', mama, when the sun  
goes down,  
In the evenin', in the evenin', mama, when the sun  
goes down,  
Well ain't it lonesome, ain't it lonesome, the one  
you love-she's not around,  
when the sun goes down.

The sun rise in the east and it goes down in the  
west,  
The sun rise in the east and it goes down in the  
west,  
Well it hard to tell, it hard to tell, which one  
will treat you the best,  
when the sun goes down.

Now last night I lay a-sleepin' I was thinkin' all  
to myself,  
Now last night I lay a-sleepin' I was thinkin' all  
to myself,  
Well, the woman I love, she mistreated me, she  
mistreated me, for someone else,  
when the sun goes down.

Now good-bye, old sweetheart and pal, yes, I'm  
going away,  
But I may be back to see ya girl, some ole'  
rainy day,  
Well in the evening, in the evening, mama, when the  
sun goes down,  
when the sun goes down.

#### Band 5: HOW LONG BLUES

You gonna be sorry ya ever done me wrong, it'll be too  
late, baby, and I'll be gone,

How long, how long, baby, how long?

If I could holler like a mountain-jack, I'd go up on  
the mountain, call my baby back,  
How long, how long, baby, how long?

I was standing at the station, watching my baby leave  
this town,  
She was so disgusted, she was Tennessee-bound,  
So long, so long, baby, so long!

How long, baby how long, must I keep my watch n'  
pawn,  
How long, How long, baby, how long? How long?

#### Band 6: SAIL ON LITTLE GIRL

Sail on, sail on, little girl sail on,  
Sail on, sail on, little girl sail on,  
Well, I don't mind you sailin'  
Baby please don't sail so long.

Ever since that my little ole' baby been gone,  
Ever since that my little ole' baby been gone,  
I just weep and worry and I have to cry and moan.

Mama look at my shiprobe and bring my walkin' shoes,  
Mama look at my shiprobe and bring on my walkin'  
shoes,  
Well, I got ta hit the highway, gotta walk away  
my blues.

Roll on, roll on, little girl roll on,  
Roll on, roll on, little girl roll on,  
Well, I don't mind you roolin'  
Mama please don't roll so long.

Bye-bye, bye-bye, little girl, bye-bye,  
Bye-bye, bye-bye, little girl, bye-bye,  
Well, I can't stay here and be happy and I ain't  
going to even cry--sail on.

#### Band 7: JOHN HENRY

John Henry had a little woman, Well, her dress she  
wore were red,  
She went walkin' down the track, she never looked  
back,  
Upon where John Henry fell dead, upon where John  
Henry fell dead.

John Henry had a little woman, and her name was  
Polly Ann,  
John Henry take sick, he had to go to bed,  
Polly Ann drove steel like a man, Polly Ann drove  
steel like a man.

John Henry told his little woman, "Baby fix my  
supper soon,  
I got a 90-mile track, I gotta ride back,  
Gonna ride by the light of the moon, gonna ride by  
the light of the moon."

John Henry hammered in the mountain, until the  
hammer caught on fire,  
Well, the las' word I heard the poor boy said:  
"I wanna cool drink a' water before I die, I wanna  
cool drink a' water before I die,  
I wanna cool drink a' water before I die, I wanna cool  
drink a' water before I die."

John Henry told his captain, "Captain, a man ain't  
nothin' but a man,  
Before I let anyone beat me down,  
I'll die with my hammer in my hand, ooh Lord, I'll  
die with my hammer in my hand,"  
'Said, "I'll die with my hammer in my hand, I will  
die with my hammer in my hand."

Well, they taken John Henry to the White House, and  
they buried him in the sand,  
All the women from the east, the women from the west,  
They come to see their steel-drivin' man, Lord, Lord,  
they come to see their steel-drivin' man,  
They come to see their steel-drivin' man, they come  
to see their steel-drivin' man.