

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FG 3536

CHICAGO BLUES

BOOGIE WOOGIE AND BLUES PLAYED AND SUNG BY

MEMPHIS SLIM

WITH "JUMP" JACKSON, DRUMS & ARBEE STIDHAM, GUITAR



PHOTO: RAE BURN FLERLAGE

DESIGN: INTERDESIGN

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CHICAGO BOOGIE FAST

Boogie Woogie
Piano Styles
Alberta
Scandinavian Boogie
Between Midnight and Dawn
Down South
The Big Race
Chicago Rent Party
Fast Boogie

CHICAGO BLUES

with Memphis Slim, Jump Jackson

and Arbee Stidham

NOTES FOR MEMPHIS SLIM, VOLUME 3.

by Martin Williams

In several of the selections in this collection Memphis Slim takes creatively energetic advantage of the extra length available on long play. The LP is also the fourth volume of Memphis Slim's music to be released by Folkways. In itself that surely speaks for a revival of interest in his music. Besides a lot of recent recording activity, there has also been a New York engagement at the Greenwich Village "Village Gate," a club which has had everything from a "topical review" called O, Oysters! to Ornette Coleman in the past year. Memphis's stay there was attended by conservative jazz fans and even the hippies, folk fans and even the folkies. The recordings have been well received by both reviewers and public. Slim's music also made a TV appearance on the Dave Garroway Today show, demonstrating "the real boogie woogie" with Willie Dixon. Inevitably, Europe rejoiced, beckoned, and Memphis Slim responded -- many a blues performer of Slim's generation can find more honor in England and on the continent than in his own country.

In several ways, I think that the music on this album gives a more specific insight into the kind of urban blues music Memphis Slim makes. It seems to me that today Memphis Slim stands somewhere between the more sophisticated players whom he gives tribute to here, and the "elementary" piano boogie stylists like Speckled Red or Montana Taylor, or even Big Maceo. In playing the way he does, Slim illustrates something that every real jazz and blues player has always done -- he borrows whatever attracts him from whatever he hears and uses it in his own music in his own way.

"Memphis Slim" is the professional name (and by now personal, if not legal name) of Peter Chatman, born to Peter Chatman (Sr.) in Memphis, Tennessee, September 3, 1915. His father sang and played piano and guitar in Memphis "juke joints" and honky-tonks and young Peter grew up surrounded by the "urban" blues of the city of Memphis -- the same source of inspiration, by the way, that W. C. Handy had had for his pieces at about the time of Slim's birth. (Note: As Charles Edward Smith explains in his notes to Folkways's album FA 3524, "Memphis Slim and the real boogie woogie", the word juke is actually of African origin, but the "jute" or "jook" joints originally had live music.)

Memphis Slim grew up listening to all the kinds of blues there were. He could hear the loose, elementary, almost formless kind of blues singing we know today only on records. He could hear Handy's very formalized, almost military, brass band blues. And he has said that he loved especially the recordings of Roosevelt Sykes, Little Brother Montgomery, Speckled Red, Leroy Carr, and the instrumental records of Clarence Williams.

Young Peter Chatman was a well-known performer in the Negro section of Memphis even while he was still in High School, but by the time he was twenty-five, he had decided to go to Chicago; recordings made in that city were now pushing "live" performers out of the joints in Memphis, and in every other city. He was then a singer and bass player, by the way, and not yet known as a pianist.

Memphis Slim was soon himself recording as "Peter and his Washboard Band", (at first) and working on records with other singers.

By 1940, Slim was playing piano with Big Bill Broonzy. Broonzy was then working in a decidedly urban blues style and not in the slow "country" blues he used in his later years. In Big Bill Blues (Grove Press, 1956), Broonzy told Yannick Bruynoghe, "He was called Memphis Slim because he comes from Memphis, Tennessee. He was born and raised around there..." "In 1940, February 18, my piano player Joshua Altheimer died, so I asked Memphis Slim to play with me and so he did. We played at the 1410 Club, at the Ruby Tavern, in New York at Town Hall, the Regal Theatre, the 8th Street Theatre, the Beehive in Chicago and many other places.

"So one day I finally told to Memphis Slim: 'You're good enough now to go on your own. You don't need Big Bill or no other blues singer with you. Just get you some good musicians to play with you and you'll be Memphis Slim just like I'm Big Bill.

"And so he did. He got a man on saxophone called Akens, a drummer called Eddie Pain, a bass called Brease, and on tenor sax the boy was Catton. And Memphis Slim is going big in the USA. He made some hit songs with his band...

"Now Memphis Slim has a good six-piece band and every man he has is a good musician. The big hit songs he got on record are Motherless Child Blues and Every Day I Have the Blues, and he has a lot of other good ones out with his band.

"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...

"When I first told Slim that he was playing like Roosevelt Sykes he got mad at me, but he found out what I meant; he changed and went to playing like Memphis Slim. When we used to play together, everywhere we went the people said that we was brothers."

Slim has also worked with Joe Williams, who, of course, became famous with Count Basie (singing Slim's Every Day, for one), and Al Hibbler. (Hibbler is blind, "but he knew the honky-tonks so well he was leading me around."). Since the late forties a gradual change has taken place in the blues styles that Slim, Sykes and Tampa Red recorded in the thirties and forties, and its younger players became known as "rhythm and blues" artists -- that is, before some of them then became known as rock and rollers. But if Fats Domino got the better billing and the bigger crowds, there have still been, as Sam Charters says in The Country Blues, (Rinehart), regular fall and summer Southern tours each year for Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, and the rest, and Slim has successfully bridged the era of the blues singer of the "race" lists like Sykes, Tampa, and Broonzy and the "rhythm and blues" of the fifties. The real phenomenon is the re-discovery of Slim and so many of his contemporaries which is manifest both by this record, and by the work of blues enthusiasts like Brunoyghe, Paul Oliver, Jacques Demetre, Raeburn Flerlage, Chris Anbertson and many others overseas. And in this country there are especially such men as Charters, Chris Straichwitz, Mack McCormack, Studs Terkle, and Kenneth Goldstein.

For this recording, Memphis Slim is accompanied and abetted by Armond "Jump" Jackson's drums. Jackson is, by the way, agent for about two thirds of the blues performer in Chicago (have a name: Shakey Jake, St. Louis Jimmy). He recently auditioned a whole South Side garage full of his clients en masse for a certain New York entrepreneur, the story goes, each one getting in about two choruses in one marathon blues piece that lasted most of the afternoon. About this work here, notice especially that Jackson's cymbals on Between Midnight and Dawn keep up a waltz time (actually probably a "gospel beat" in origin), while his snare whops out a currently modish rhythm-and-blues back beat. I was also delighted with his work on the Fast Boogie, for whenever Memphis's boogie structures lead him into a traditional phrase or motif, Jackson reproduces its metre on drums along with Slim.

Guitarist Arbee Stidham, a fixture on many recent blues LPs, is present. (He used to play alto, incidentally, and his father, Luddie Stidham, was a member of the by now almost legendary Memphis Jug Band). His plaintive interplay with Slim's piano on Between Midnight and Dawn and Down South simply is the blues (there is no other way to put it) -- the kind of communal expression of blues feeling that has been around longer than anyone knows and that seems to pass from one generation to the next as inevitably as life. I enjoyed especially the moment in The Big Race when Memphis calls Stidham away from his background riffs to give a solo. Stidham responds by developing a continuous melodic line directly out of those very background figures. It is something to hear.

An indication of the kind of reception Slim's recent recordings have received were Whitney Balliett's comments in The New Yorker, "The appearance of (The Real Boogie Woogie: Memphis Slim, Piano Solos) (Folkways Records FG 3524) is a surprising event; it is the first new boogie-woogie record to be released in nearly a decade, and, more than that, its American Weekly title tells the truth. An all but vanished art, boogie-woogie remains, in recordings and in the memory, one of the imperishable ornaments of jazz...He has obviously listened to Yancey, Ammons, and Lewis, but there are in his style more distinct overtones of lesser-known and less adept pianists like Roosevelt Sykes, Speckled Red, and Cow Cow Davenport. The jostling of these disparate influences is fascinating..." And the same kind of evidence that can convince that Memphis Slim is not, as Balliett also put it, "merely vestigial" can also be heard here.

There is, for instance, Slim's Chicago Rent Party. Musically it is, as he indicates, a tribute to Jimmy Yancey and also has Slim's usual honoring of Pete Johnson, but nobody can make Slim's kind of natural and personal alliance of their very different styles from impulses merely academic or memorial. There is also talk of "way back in 1937" and "the good old days," but no one could put so much direct energy as Slim does into mere nostalgia; these things are still very much alive to him.

The tributes on Boogie Woogie Piano Styles actually begin before Slim begins naming them. The first chorus has a gesture toward Jimmy Yancey and a bow to Meade "Lux" Lewis. The next three pay homage to Pete Johnson, with a nod to Albert Ammons in the third chorus. The spoken tributes are followed by an appropriately eight-bar blues chorus for Leroy Carr, a very Slim-ish adaptation of Meade Lux's Honky Tonky Train motif. England is on Slim's mind when he speaks of Pete Johnson, actually living obscurely and ill in Buffalo, New York when these pieces were recorded. (England might have given Pete the work that America has not for the past ten years, the kind of work that Memphis Slim can find there.) When Slim says that if you can play like Pete Johnson, you've got it made, he means you've got it made musically, not necessarily commercially, of course.

Pinetop Smith didn't originate the boogie woogie style, of course, but he did first use the name on a record. Smith polished this special, percussive way of playing the blues, and his use of "breaks" (where the ostinato bass line suspends for two or four bars) was tantalizingly inimitable. There are dissonances in this piece and at other places in Slim's performances, that are not the usual "blue" ones; the answer I think is that Slim sometimes follows the treble contours of the more sophisticated boogie players he admires, without always adopting their way of making chord changes to his bass figures. But it would seem to me almost academic to call such things mistakes on Slim's part.

I was struck also by the verses Slim offers to Alberta; most of them probably are as durable old as the blues. And they may also be popularized tomorrow in the latest rock and roll hit.

You will find Slim humorously interpolating (of all things) Donkey Serenade fragments into his Scandinavian Boogie. And worth special attention is the way the initial semi-walking bass figure of the Fast Boogie gradually becomes a rolling bass and a "rocks" or "rocking" figure. (Some researchers, by the way,

have traced each of the common boogie bass figures back to a geographical area of origin, often in Texas, Oklahoma, Florida, and Georgia.¹⁾

Down South and the double meaning Big Race are both obviously the kind of cabaret-social-protest that Negro performers were often encouraged to produce in the thirties. But that does not mean they are necessarily false. For even Slim's traditional racial jokes on Down South (You don't serve Negroes here? That's good, 'cause I don't eat them.) are examples of what one Negro writer recently called "telling the truth by lying your head off." The real humanity of it is in the graceful humor, and also in Slim's human willingness to wander off, onto the subject of rock and roll and joining them if you can't beat them.

Of course, a folklorist would point out that African animal stories may be indirectly alluded to in The Big Race. Perhaps the real point is that not only lying your head off, but wishful thinking, verval cliché, and non sequitor can also reveal emotional truth.

Running through all of this recital is the fact central to all blues and to all jazz: that is that this sort of music is not something to read, interpret, re-create, but that music is something you make yourself. You make it from whatever you have heard that you liked and whatever you have felt that is important to you. Whatever the sources, you interpret and present them your own way. A new life is constantly required of such music; a life that comes only by doing.

Martin Williams
Co-editor, The Jazz Review

1. See Charles Edward Smith's aforementioned notes to Folkways FA 3524 for comments on the boogie woogie piano style.

SIDE I

Band 1: BOOGIE WOOGIE PIANO STYLES
Band 2: ALBERTA
Band 3: SCANDINAVIAN BOOGIE
Band 4: BETWEEN MIDNIGHT AND DAWN
Band 5: 46th STREET BOOGIE

SIDE II

Band 1: THE BIG RACE
Band 2: CHICAGO RENT PARTY
Band 3: DOWN SOUTH

She cooked my breakfast
And she brang it to my bed;

Alberta, she cooked my breakfast
She brings it on to my bed

Ah, and while I'm enjoyin' my breakfast,
Alberta, she holds my head.

I don't care what you say
I don't care what you think of me,

I don't care what you say,
I don't care what you think of me,

But my gal Alberta
She suits me to a "T."

So long,
I guess I'll be on my way;

So long,
I guess I'll be on my way.

The reason I'm leaving, people,
I've got to see Alberta today.

BETWEEN MIDNIGHT AND DAWN

Between midnight and dawn, baby,
A many hours have to part

Between midnight and dawn,
Lord, a many hours have to part.

Well, I can't forget you, baby.
Oo, well, well, remember you walked in my heart

Let us say, 'Good night,'
And don't let it fill our hearts with pain;

Let us all say, 'Good night,'
And don't let it fill our hearts with pain.

Well, well, and may God bless us,
And send us down a golden chain.

Baby, you put me out
When the sun was shining bright;

Baby, you put me out
Lord, when the sun was shining bright.

Well, when I was down and out,
You wouldn't let me spend the night.

But that's all right,
Well I'll take life with a smile;

That's all right
Lord, I'll take life with a smile.

For now I'm gettin' kinda use t'it
Oo, well, well, I feel just a motherless child.

THE BIG RACE

Well, we finally won the Big Race
While the Elephant for eight years has been
taking the place
We finally won the Big Race.

You know, up stepped a Donkey
Whom I've always betted on

ALBERTA

Every day
My baby rolls across my mind;

Every day
My baby rolls across my mind.

I hate to loose Alberta
'Cause that kind of girl is hard to find.

To take over the victory
And bring everything back home.

But you know we had a good jockey,
A jockey who was willing to fight
And take the inside track
And come out front with the Civil Rights.

Yes, we been running a long, long time
But oh, happy days, man, you know
When we can go to any track
And sit in any grandstand
And be served -- and be accepted cheerfully
Which we deserve.
(Tell me all about it, fella.)

So right now, I think I'll take a big pause,
A pause that refreshes
And enjoy a great victory
That I think is good for the cause.

Yes, we won the big race,
But, you know, one of these days
There'll be no Big Race
And we can walk the streets with pride;
Even the Elephant and Donkey will walk side
by side.
(Yes, let's walk home.)

CHICAGO HOUSE RENT PARTY

Back in 19 and 37 we called it the Chicago
House Rent Party Blues. That was before Jimmy
Yancey got framed. . . . Chicago White Sox
ball park. Later on . . . the one and only
Jump Jackson and his band had his combo there.
Things was better then.

Way back in 1937, Lord, if you couldn't play
this type of piano, you couldn't get a job in
Chicago at a house rent party.

But Jump Jackson, he had it made. He went
throughout the world playing drums. . . ran
until wee morning. You know one thing? Back
in those old house rent party days we didn't
make no money but we had a whole lot of fun.
Me and Jimmy Yancey, Big Bill Broonzy, Tampa
Red, Arbee Stidham, Jump Jackson, Washboard
Sam, Curtis Jones, Big Maceo, I could name a
million guys. We were all friends. If we
had one piece of bread, we had twenty people
who would break it into that many pieces.
Those were the good old days.

DOWN SOUTH

Down south my native land
Don't get me wrong, I'm not bragging ...
But I'm very glad, I'm very happy ...
Because being, being born in the south you
get so much experience ...
If you make it away from the south you got
it made ...
Mr. Bilbo, Mr. Crow (?) and all those guys
out to get you
But I had a brother ... as you know I'm 64,
My brother called me Shorty
My brother was born above the Mason and
Dixon line - Newark, New Jersey
My brother came down to visit me (you know)
Being a good sport I had to carry him around...
To the back door - down south ...
This where the Southern Cross the Dog - Mobile

I know all you boys are familiar with it ...
So while in the pool room shooting a little
pool
My brother, he always had a mind of his own,
He gets hungry you know,
He steps next door to the bus station
Not noticing the sign where it said
"colored only"
He goes in the wrong side, so they say ...
My brother wasn't used to that kind of stuff,
you know...
So the guy says, "What can I do for you, boy...
... "I'd like a hamburger"
So the guy, he knew brother didn't know what
he was doing, he told him,
Says, "We don't serve Negroes".
My brother says, "Wonderful, I don't eat them
either. Give me a hamburger."
So he got the hamburger.
It takes this - It takes nerve.
Another kid went down south with me
Visiting my old home town - so we goes to the
comissary ... Arbee Stidham
He never been south before ...
So the guy (I knew how to act)... the guy says,
"Old Peter, how you feeling?"
"Fine"
"What can I do for you?"
I say, "Give me a pound of that cheese, if
you please".
"Wonderful, Peter, wonderful. I see you have
not forgotten your learning."
"What else can I do for you?"
I said, "Give me a box of crackers, if you
please."
"Good old Peter, good old Peter."
So Arbee wanted some Camel cigarettes.
So he said, "What can I do you for fellah?"
Arbee said, "Give me a pack of Camel
cigarettes."
So Mr. Edwards tried to help Arbee.
He say, "If you . . . if you . . ."
You know he's trying to tell Arbee to say,
"If you . . ."
"So what you mean? Gimme a pack o' Camel
cigarettes."
"I know - if you . . . if you . . ."
He said, "Yeah, if you got 'em; if you
haven't, I'll go next door."
Boy, this guy's scaring me to death.

But you know, the funny thing down South,
all kidding aside - it's so silly. My mother,
your mother, they feed the guys down there,
you know, put diapers on them, raise them,
then they don't want to eat with you.
They raise them, then when they become 17
years old, they want you to say, "Mister."
Some people call it prejudice,
But I call it just plain ignorance.
Yes, down South.

Only one solution to it, though.
That's youth.
The young people see it different.
Like a guy told me.
He says, "You know, rock and roll has got
to go."
He was about 54 years old.
I said, "I bet you'll go before rock and
roll. Because the young people was the ones
that brought rock and roll in, and they
gonna last much longer than you. They're
17, 18 and 19." This guy's 54.
He says, "I'll see rock and roll go."
So the moral of the story is: "If you
can't beat them, join them."
That goes for Down South.