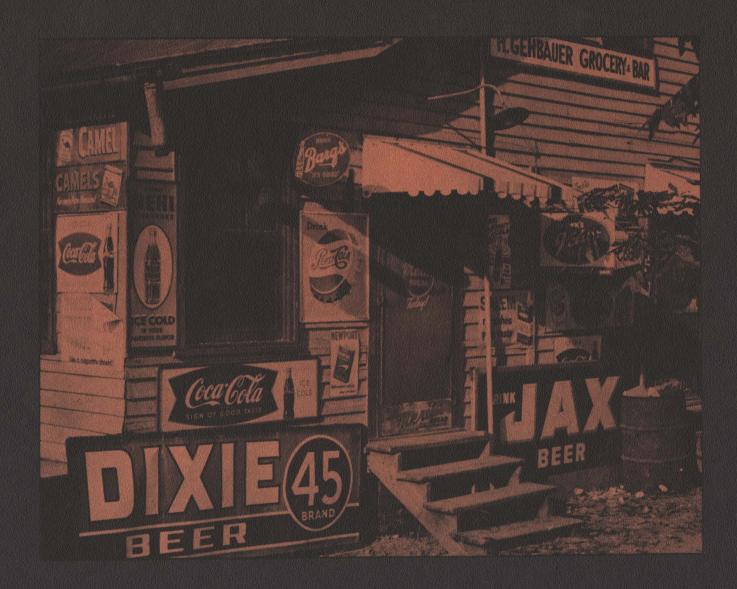
# PIANO BLUES RBF 12





Compiled and Edited by Samuel B. Charters

WALTER ROLAND - Big Mama
WALTER ROLAND - Dice's Blues
SYLVESTER PALMER - Broke Man Blues
MISSISSIPPI JOOK BAND - Skippy Whippy
WESLEY WALLACE - Fanny Lee Blues
WESLEY WALLACE - Number 29
JABBO WILLIAMS - Pratt City Blues
WALTER DAVIS - M & O Blues #3
ROMEO NELSON - Dyin' Rider Blues
LOUISE JOHNSON - On The Wall
ROOSEVELT SYKES - Lost All I Had Blues
LITTLE BROTHER MONTGOMERY - The First Time I Met You
JABBO WILLIAMS - Jab Blues
PEETIE WHEATSTRAW - Good Woman Blues

PIANO BLUES

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY ANN CHARTERS / DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

**RBF 12** 

# PIANO BLUES

### Side A

- Walter Roland Walter Roland 3. Sylvester Palmer
- 4. Mississippi Jook Band 5. Wesley Wallace
- 6. Wesley Wallace 7. Jabbo Williams
- -Big Mama
- -Dice's Blues
- -Broke Man Blues
- -Skippy Whippy
- -Fanny Lee Blues
- -Number 29
- **Pratt City Blues**

### Side B

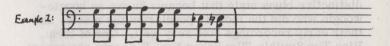
- L Walter Davis 2. Romeo Nelson
- 3. Louise Johnson 4. Roosevelt Sykes
- 6. Jabbo Williams
- -M & O Blues #3
- -Dyin' Rider Blues
- -On The Wall
- -Lost All I Had Blues
- 5. Little Brother Montgomery-The First Time I Met You
- Jab Blues
- Good Woman Blues 7. Peetie Wheatstraw

### Notes by Samuel Charters

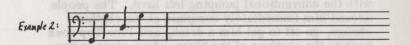
Back in a dark corner in a shambling Mississippi juke joint, or pushed into an opening over the bar in a club in Alabama, up on a rickety balcony in a New Orleans dance hall, next to the door in a saloon in Galveston, there used to be as many pianos as there are now juke boxes. Most of them were heavy, ornate uprights, the maker's trademark painted over the keyboard with flowing gold letters, the wooden cases carved with flowers and wreathes and pedestals and columns. Also most of them were out of tune, the felts worn off the dampers so they had a tinny, jangling sound, the ivories on the keys were broken and stained, and the pedals were usually gone. But they still played, and the piano has had almost as long and important a place in the development of the blues as the guitar. Because of its place in the dance orchestra the piano was as important to the development of early jazz as it was to the blues, and there were already ragtime and barrelhouse styles before the blues took on a definite shape. Older jazz pianists could tell where a man was from by listening to the way he played the bass, but, as Jelly Roll Morton put it, "Everybody had their own style." The pianists were mostly itinerant entertainers, playing popular songs and dances, as well as blues and ragtime. In their own way they were like the old songsters, and like the guitar players and blues singers they learned from each other sitting in the saloons or the brothels taking turns at the piano in all night "cutting" contests.

The piano was suited to the blues in some ways, and in others it had difficulties of its own. It was loud and strong and not too hard to learn, and there were pianos in most of the little clubs, but at the country balls and cabin parties there weren't pianos around. Most blues men, even today, play both piano and guitar, even though they're usually better on one than they are on the other. Also the piano is tuned to the European diatonic scale, while the blues vocal scale is almost always a gapped pentatonic, or five note scale. The most serious problem is in the major-minor relationship of the third of the scale. In their singing they usually used a so-called "neutral tone" that was between the two, and on the guitar they could push a string, or slide on it with a bottleneck to get a tone that had the ambivalence of the vocal line. The ragtime pianists had already been troubled by the same problem, and they had finally found a number of ways to get around it. In one of James Scott's best rags, "Grace And Beauty," the opening melodic phrase is a pentatonic scale outline, without diatonic alteration. Also in the chord texture of the rags there was frequent use of both the major and minor intervals of the chord within a measure or phrase, and the resulting composite sound had considerable ambiguity.

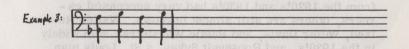
The blues pianists had some of this problem in both the melodies and the harmonic structure. Often in the left hand the third of the scale was eliminated, and the bass pattern was built on the open fifth or open octave. One of the more complex basses in the style of piano that became known as boogie-woogie used both the open fifth and the ambivalent third, the little finger and thumb playing the outer notes and the third and second finger playing the flatted third to major third that ended the pattern.



A fast bass pattern that was used in Texas and Louisiana developed around the open octave and fifth, avoiding the third.



In many of the piano blues styles the left hand patterns were clearly related to the local guitar blues accompaniments. The alternating octave-fifth was similar to the alternating thumb picking of Mississippi, which moved from either the octave or the fifth. The wide spread piano bass of alternating intervals of the fifth and the sixth



was closely related to the guitar pattern that used the little finger to move up and down on a string, from fret to fret, to give some variety to the sound of the open harmonies.

The melodic material of the blues pianists was usually a series of sequential figures that retained their outline, even though they moved through a series of harmonic changes. The concept was close to the jazz melodic practise that Winthrop Sargeant has called

the "blues Tetrachord." What this meant to the blues pianist was that he usually played with the notes under his right hand, limiting himself to patterns that could be played within the fifth of the scale; then moving to a hand position with the thumb on the fourth note of the scale and repeating the pattern almost without alteration. Some of the more inventive pianists went much beyond this, but this was a very effective, as well as simple technique, and it's still used by a number of singerpianists. The cadential figure on the dominant harmony that ended every verse was often a quasi-dominant in which the bass stayed on the tonic harmony while the right hand played a descending scale that included the fifth and the second of the key before resolving on the root tone of the key.

The earliest blues recordings, and more especially the so-called "classic blues" recordings of the mid-1920's were usually accompanied by pianists, often a male pianist accompanying a female vocalist. The style, however, was a heavy, repetitive jazz sound, with the left hand playing the alternating chord tone-chord of European dance music.



It was not until the late twenties, and the country blues recordings, that the more characteristic blues piano styles began to emerge, with their looser, flowing rhythms and the harmonic ambiguity of the guitar accompaniments. It was perhaps the pianists playing in a very distinctive blues style that became known as boogiewoogie who did the most to popularise the music, and their early recordings sold very well. One of them, Pine Top Smith's 'T'm Sober Now, " clearly shows that the musicians themselves were conscious of the differences in the styles. Pine Top begins the piece in a blues-boogie style, complaining that he's been sitting there playing for everybody and they haven't gotten him a drink; then he starts to play a kind of jazz piece with the conventional pumping left hand. The people around him immediately complain at the rhythmic change, go off to get him a drink, and Pine Top goes back to the rhythms of the blues. As a piano instrumental style boogie-woogie is so distinctive that it has to be considered as a separate musical form, but when the boogie pianists accompanied their own singing or worked in small groups behind other singers the differences became blurred, and if asked they would have said they were playing the blues just as much as they were playing boogie.

Some of the pianists on this selection of piano blues from the 1920's and 1930's had very successful careers, others are still almost unknown. Walter Roland, Walter Davis, and Peetie Wheatstraw sold widely in the 1930's, and Roosevelt Sykes, a St. Louis pian nist who became known as "The Honeydripper" after his recording of the piece brought him considerable attention, is still playing and recording through the South, even though he hasn't had a hit recording in a number of years. Little Brother Montgomery, from New Orleans, did some of his finest recordings after he hung around Vicksburg with the country guitarist and pianist Skip James, but his style became more conventional over the years and he's working now with a series of small dixieland bands in the Chicago area. Both Walter Davis and Peetie Wheatstraw have

died, Wheatstraw in an automobile accident in East St. Louis in the 1940's, Davis recently from complications following a stroke in St. Louis.

Almost nothing is know of Sylvester Palmer and the pianist from the Mississippi Jook Band, who was probably Cooney Vaughn. Wesley Wallace is one of the most interesting of the early blues pianists, but despite efforts by a number of people there is still nothing known about him. His "Number 29" is a brilliant personal variant on the train themes that were popular among early boogie players. The bass rhythm is an unaccented 6/4, (not 5/4 as was suggested in a recent article - the pattern begins at the ascending notes and ends with the 'west tone, repeating without hesitation) and the right hand is involved with rhythms that suggest 4/4 as well as a 6/4 that doesn't coincide with the rhythm of the bass. Jabbo Williams was from the same north Birmingham slum that produced Pine Top Smith, but his technique seemed to have more of a ragtime flavor than Smith's more fluid playing. Certainly Williams was one of the most energetic of the early pianists to record. Romeo Nelson is probably better known as a boogie pianist, but he played in a number of styles, from the most conventional popular blues to the intricate figures of his 'Dyin' Rider Blues." Louise Johnson is a difficult problem because of some uncertainty over the pianist. For many years jazz and boogie collectors have assumed that the pianist on the recordings is the Chicago musician 'Cripple Clarence" Lofton. It sounds like Lofton, with all of his characteristic roughness and exuberance, but Son House, who was in Chicago with Louise JOhnson for the sessions, says that she accompanied herself. It is is Louise Johnson then she was one of the great early blues pianists. If it's Lofton then it's one of his best sessions as an accompaniest. Either way, and there is still considerable confusion over the recordings, 'On The Wall" is a very effective performance.

There were, of course, dozens of blues pianists who made recordings during the early period, and any selection has to leave out almost as many important musicians as it includes. Among this group, however, are some of the most exciting and the most challenging of the musicians who first recorded the piano blues.

Samuel Charters

### Side A

1. Walter Roland -- "Big Mama"

Callin' hey, big mama, (three times)
Callin' hey, big mama,
Take your big legs off of me.

She got great big legs, walkin' size, (three times)
And every time she beats me,
You know it makes me cry.

Everytime she calls me, you know she makes me mad, (three times

But I ain't never told her

About that man she had.

You know she makes me mad when she calls
my name, (three times)
But you know I never told her
She could not shake that thing.

### 2. Walter Roland -- "Dice's Blues"

I say, dices oh dices, please don't shoot three on me, (twice) You know I'm just as broke and hungry As any gambler ought to be.

You know my woman gave me money, just to play good jack, (twice)
I didn't win no money, but
You know I played my hand.

I went down in Louisiana, down on that floor, (twice)
I wonder if I'll win any money,
Sure gonna bring it home.

I gambled yesterday, and I gambled again today, (twice)
But you know if I don't win tomorrow
I'm gonna throw my cards away.

Says, you know I'm a gambler, 'cause I've been gambling all the time (twice) But you know, I've got to win some money So I can give it to that gal of mine.

### 3. Sylvester Palmer -- "Broke Man Blues"

I know just how bad, baby, How a broke man feels, There is no one, baby, Who will do him a real good deal.

I been broke all day, baby, Did not have a lousy dime, But I'll be all right, baby I swear some other time.

I don't feel welcome, Mama, in St. Louis anymore, (repeat) 'Cause I have no friends And there's no place to go.

I'm gonna leave this town, baby
And I swear I ain't comin' back no mo',
I been treated so bad
I can't be happy no mo'.

I've lost all my money, baby, And everything I had too, That's why you hear me cryin' Mama, these broke man blues.

Ummhumm, I ain't got to sing it no more, (repeat) (spoken)
'Cause I been broke, baby,
And I got these broke man blues.

### Band 6. Wesley Wallace -- "Number 29"

A little train called 29,
. . . comin' from St. Louis.
. . . she blows that whistle,
She blows the whistle this way.
I caught that train one night,

I was intendin' to get off in Illinois.

I mean that train was runnin'
She wasn't doin' nothin' but runnin' hard,
Something like this.

Just before she got to the border
She thought she'd blow that whistle again.
She blow that whistle something like this.
She's loafin' now.
I wanted to get off that train
But she's goin' too fast.
I hauled away and stretched one foot on the
ground, . . . nearly knocked my
brains out. .
And fell off. I was rollin' when I hit the
ground.

I'm rollin' now. I got up and waved my hand,

Side B

### Band l. Walter Davis -- "M & O Blues #3"

told her goodbye.

My baby got a ruling,
And she called the chief of police.
My baby got a ruling,
Called the police up to my door,
And I believe to my soul
Goin' to have to ride that M & O.

I'm a railroad man, and I love that M & O.

(repeat)

And when I leave this time

I ain't comin' back no mo'.

Now don't the moon look pretty, shinin' down through the trees, (repeat)
I can see my baby,
But I swear that she can't see me.

I'm a mean old traveler, and I believe I've got to go, (repeat)
I'm goin' to leave here, people,
Goin' to catch that M & O.

Band 2. Romeo Nelson -- "Dyin' Rider Blues"

I got a letter from my rider, What do you reckon it read? (repeat) Hurry home, papa, rider's almost dead.

Band 4. Roosevelt Sykes -- "Lost All I Had Blues"

I woke up this mornin', found many things on my mind (repeat)
As I thought about my troubles,
Could not keep from cryin'.

I turned around, looked toward the sun, (repeat)
Said if these blues don't kill me
I wasn't born to die.

I lost all I had, everything I had to lose, (repeat)
I lost the one I love,

I just can't lose these blues.

It's tough to lose everything you got, lose the one you love,
You know I got the blues.

As I see it, I be blue all the time, (repeat) If I don't go crazy, Then I will lose my mind.

I believe I'll just go home and kill my wife alive. Yes sir,
' cause she come and bring me that old jive.

And I better go home than sit in some old dive.

(spoken)

## Band 5. Little Brother Montgomery -"The First Time I Met You"

The first time I met the blues, mama, They came walkin' through the wood. (repeat)
They stopped at my house first, mama, And done me all the harm they could.

Now my blues got at me, and run me from tree to tree, (repeat) You should have heard me beggin', Mister Blues, don't bother me.

Good mornin', blues, what are you doin' here so soon? (repeat)
You be with me every mornin',
Lordy, every night and noon.

The blues came down the valley, and stopped right at my door, (repeat)
They give me more hard luck and trouble
Than I ever had before.

### Band 7. Peetie Wheatstraw -- "Good Woman Blues"

What makes me love my baby, (repeat) She loved me when I was down, Well, she was nice and kind, She did not dog me around.

You know, most of the women Will listen to what people say, (repeat) But you know my babe, Well, well, she's just the other way.

She gave me money, and kept me nice and clean, (repeat)
You know when I was down,
My babe didn't treat me mean.

Now I'm good to my baby, since I'm up on my feet, (repeat) Now I don't care If I see another wo man on the street.

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RF 12 PIANO BLUES

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RF 203-2 NEW ORLEANS JAZZ: THE '20's,

Volume 2.

RF 203 NEW ORLEANS JAZZ: THE '20's, Volumes 1 and 2.



# PIANO BLUES Compiled and Edited by Samuel Charters SIDE 2. RF-12B 331/3 RPM SIDE 2. RF-12B 1. WALTER UAVIS M & 0 Blues #3 1. WALTER UAVIS M & 0 Blues #3 1. WOMEN RESION - Dyin Rider Blues 2. ROMAN RESION - DYIN RIDER BLUES 3. ROMAN RESIDENCE TYPE MAIN TO BLUES 3. LITTLE BROTHER DAYS HEAD BLUES 7. PEETE WHEATSTRAW - Good Woman Blues 7. PEETE WHEATSTRAW - GOOD WOMAN BLUES