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What is Boogie-Woogie?

By
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FIRST, one can say that boogie-woogie is an authentic, soul-satisfying genre of piano music, native to America and for which America is indebted to the Negro people. There is a dance by that name, but it is merely incidental. A few orchestrations have been made, leaning heavily on the piano. That is a piquant by-product. Boogie-woogie belongs to the piano, and is giving that historical instrument a new lease on life.

If you asked Al Ammons, one of the foremost exponents of boogie-woogie, what boogie-woogie is, he would smile, his eyes would light up, and probably he would say: 'Man! It scares you.' And it does. There are deep reasons why it tugs at our race memories and slumbering instincts.

If I were asked to describe boogie-woogie by an alumnus of some conservatory, I might say that it consists of improvised characteristic variations over a repeated bass figure. That is to say, a jive tune, tossed all over the place, with a bass to keep it anchored.

Boogie-woogie is new in the sense that the general public, as represented by the radio and film audiences, is just beginning to relish it. It is old, in that it began when Negroes in America first got their hands on pianos and started working out their musical heritage.

Economics had a share in naming and developing boogie-woogie, which may or may not be a comfort to the righteous alligator. As has been pointed out in Ramsay and Smith's excellent text book, 'Jazz Men,' the term: 'throwing a boogie,' has been used for years in the Negro sections of various American cities to describe a party with a small admission fee, organized for the purpose of raising rent money. At such gatherings, there was not room to dance and no funds to hire orchestras. So the entertainment was furnished by a hot pianist and the best ones were always in demand. Thus the pianists gained an audience and got better,

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and the audience became more discriminating and appreciative by leaps and bounds. This was a great break for pure piano music, and blue shouters who learned to make themselves heard over the sound of a crowd.

Although controlled in its content, boogie-woogie has a wide emotional and temperamental range. In the hands of Count Basie, for instance, it becomes lacy, precise, almost Chopinesque. It is a comment, a sort of teaser. Most of it remains between the lines. When Albert Ammons takes over the piano, one hears a lusty roar and a joyful, spontaneous riot of melody. That, for me, is the deeper groove. Pete Johnson, from Kansas City, plays a vigorous provocative accompaniment for unexpurgated thoughts. Cleo Brown practically changes your luck. Meade Lux Lewis brings out all the melancholy and nostalgia of a people on their way out of darkness. You don't have to hold your breath and listen, and grip the sides of your chair, as if you were driving a plane, or about to take ether. If you miss a phrase or chorus, because of the hiss of a siphon or the greeting of a fellow alligator, another riff will come along. 'The boys who play it never seem to run dry. For this relief, much thanks.'

Hot jazz is by blues, out of spirituals. Boogie-woogie stems from farther back. The bass, which stays for the most part within the limit of three fundamental chords, (the tonic, sub-dominant and dominant) is a modification of the "drone" bass common to all primitive systems of music. In Scotland, Ireland, Northern Spain, France, Germany, etc., it was played on different forms of bagpipes, in stirring fifths. Old Kentucky fiddlers drew it out of second fiddles, while first fiddles saved the tune. Kettle drums produce an analogous effect in an orchestra. It is not necessary to give more examples, although numerous ones will spring to any musician's mind. The piano, under the left hand of a boogie-woogie artist, is a bagpipe, a drum, a bass fiddle, surf rumblings, distant thunder, all refined and rolled into one. The left hand produces something one can depend up-

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on, something that has a cumulative, hypnotic effect which sets off the nuances of the melody. Very often, the listener has a chance to carry the tune himself, while right hand chords accentuate the off-beats of the bass. If two or more pianists are playing together, they take turns "sending," while the others play under them. Then they all let loose, but, as Pete Johnson once said to me, and very earnestly: 'The more you can *hear*, the better it is.'

Fellow hep-cats, that is often the question. How much are you qualified to hear? In listening to boogie-woogie, one's capacity for 'hearing' is extended and improved. The identity between hearer and performer is approached more nearly, the more nearly they are matched in ability. The same is true of any music, be it historical, classical, standard or contemporaneous.

Certain problems faced by Mozart, for instance, when the piano was young, confronted the early masters of boogie-woogie. The kind of piano which was discarded by the southern whites and given to Negroes for mowing the lawn had little resonance. Sustained tones were impossible to produce. So, independently, those groping pianists (knowing nothing of the European piano literature) filled in the gaps with embellishments and variations, just as Mozart had done. And very quickly they 'discovered' the dominant seventh and leaned upon it, as Monteverde had done in the formative days of Italian music. Idioms were developed and passed around. The players never knew whether they were in the major or the minor, and the result was a characteristic mode that runs along the border line. They didn't understand that Papa Haydn and his predecessors ended up a musical sentence, nine times out of ten, with a harmonic progression from the sub-dominant to the dominant to the tonic, so the talented Negroes got in the habit of reversing the process. Boogie-woogie bass goes from the tonic to the sub-dominant, back to the tonic, then concludes as follows:

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dominant
sub-dominant
tonic

The Spanish flamenco music, for instance, has the haunting finale:

dominant
sub-dominant
mediant

The famous 'boogie-woogie beat' is somewhere between 6|8 and 4|4 rhythms. The first boogie-woogie pianists had to learn to play without benefit of Liszt or Letchetetski. They worked out a method which transcends some of the limitations of the conventional keyboard. Here is the secret of it, as told me by Albert Ammons:

'Elliot. Quit worryin'. Don't play it. Boot it. Grab a handful of keys and sail.'

There are many Negro composers whose names are not known, because every Negro who kicks the box sharply is a composer whenever he plays. He never plays the same phrase twice the same way, or else he falls in love with it and repeats it sixteen times. The only rule is: express what you're feeling at the time. A few talented composers who didn't know A-flat from a semi-quaver when it was written down are beginning to come into their own: Pinetop Smith, Jimmy Yancey, Hersal Thomas, Meade Lux Lewis and others. It is not rash to say that they are the only composers for the piano since Chopin. Some of their pieces, like the 'Yancey Special,' come under the head of 'absolute music.' 'Roll 'em Pete' (Pete Johnson) is impressionistic, the creation of a mood, and a dangerous one, at that. Meade Lewis' 'Honkey Tonk Train' is as good a piece of 'descriptive' music as has ever been composed. If any of the conservative boys think I'm laying it on too thick, I ask them to come forward with a better example, from Debussy or Moussorgsky or Berlioz.

You are going to hear a lot of so-called boogie-woo-

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gie in the future. Already in Hollywood it is becoming diluted and vanilla-frosted to resemble crooning and other local forms of tonal self-abuse. The work of the boogie-woogie artists is going to be incorporated into musical literature, but like the Spanish flamenco, it will disentangle itself and survive distinctly, strictly dino for those who like it. As far as I am concerned, those who don't like it can take a flying hump at the moon.

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