BIG MACEO
Paul Oliver

October 1929 brought to the United States the greatest economic disaster in her history when the stock market prices, ballooning through the results of a speculative orgy, collapsed with devastating effect. The Wall Street crash rendered a shock to the nation's system which rapidly paralyzed the arteries of trade and commerce and killed the vital organs of industry. In vestments ceased, factories closed, and by 1932 between twelve and fifteen million workers were unemployed. Outside the shuttered entrances of the halls where they had so recently danced the Grizzly Bear and the Buzzard Lope to the music of the jazz bands, poverty-shocked men now stood in mute bread-lines with their backs turned to the driving sleet. Common to all, the nation's misery was mirrored in every facet of its multi-planed existence; was reflected in the minute aspect which is jazz as in any other. Except for a very few who were playing the Big Time, which could withstand even such a shock as the Depression without emptying its purse, the musicians and singers who had recently enjoyed a booming success at the clubs and cabarets, the dance-halls and roof-gardens, were now finding themselves "laid off." As the entertainment centres closed they went on fruitless tours in "the sticks" or, more wisely, sought work in whatever field to which they could adapt them selves where work was still to be found. As the effect of the economic crisis hit them the recording companies switched off their microphones, closed their filing cabinets, bolted their doors. Some were never to open again, the piles of unplayed wax passed into the hands of the official receivers.

So it was that the Classic period of jazz, the so-called "Golden Age," came to a close, and, at the same time, the more humble activities of the Northern city folk musicians, the boogie-woogie and blues pianists, were also called to a virtual halt. In some ways it is true their music may have meant more to them at this time than at any other, for above all the blues is a vehicle of self-expression, an outlet for emotions: to many a coloured man his piano may have been his only solace in a time of the severest stress. This was the period when the familiar-unfamiliar names of Romeo Nelson and Dobby Bragg, of Charles Avery and Henry Brown, were to be seen on new issues for the last time. And it was to be many years before the names of Montana Taylor and Cow Cow Davenport, Jimmy Yancey and Cripple Clarence Lofton were to be seen—in some instances for the first time—on a record label. Some of those remote and singular musicians who recorded perhaps twice, or who recorded not at all, may never again have touched a piano. As personalities they have disappeared; as names they decorate the pages of this book or that with their strange evocativeness. What appears to have been the first generation of recording boogie-woogie pianists had thus passed on. But the picture is deceptive: it was the extreme youth of many of these musicians —such as Eurreal Montgomery—when they made their first recordings, or in the cases of such pianists as Pine Top Smith or George Thomas's son Hersal, their equally youthful demise, that causes them to appear to be members of an earlier generation. Were they alive or playing today, many of these seemingly distant characters would be less aged than a number of the piano personalities still admired for the youthfulness and virility of their playing. It was natural of course

that some pianists succeeded in bridging the recording gap and these, as one would expect, were the most popular. Though he had started recording late (June 1928), Leroy Carr had been a resounding success. Before the effects of the Depression hit even as reliable a financial certainty as this best-loved blues artist, he had made some eighty recordings. It is no surprise to find that when the first tentative issues were again put on the market that Leroy Carr should be among the first artists to be recorded. Significantly, his last title before a two-year gap was *The Depression Blues,* and Hurry *Down Sunshine* was appropriately enough among the first titles he made when he again faced the micro phone. The sun was to shine on Carr for just one more year during which the style of singing and playing which had so endeared him to the hearts of countless members of his race underwent no change.

When, however, in the middle and late 'thirties the recording of "race" musicians recommenced in earnest there had been a significant change in the nature of the music. The piano blues and boogie-woogie of the "first generation" pianists had for the most part been a series of solo performances, augmented occasionally by perhaps a guitar. Boogie was a folk music, centred in a Northern city and always closely related to urban surroundings, but it still retained a certain flavour of its Southern and Mid-Western origins. For the most part such musicians lived and worked apart from the development of band jazz. There were of course the washboard and "hokum" bands which made some tenuous link, but the strongest connection between the current trends in band jazz and the music of the South Side pianists was in the person of Jimmy Blythe, who succeeded having a foot in both camps. A prolific recorder with Dodds, Dominique and Armstrong, he also played the blues of his even less unsophisticated party pianist brethren. In his recordings with the Dixie Four, in spite of their vamping bass figures which are often close to ragtime, he does give some indication of the direction in which future trends in "race" music lay. While the arc lamps shone with ever-increasing brightness on the great but sensational Ammons-Lewis-Johnson team, and illuminated the highway to Carnegie Hall, the emergence of the style which may conveniently be called "Urban Blues" manifested itself. In this subsequent development of Northern city folk music the emphasis was on driving rhythm sections with sometimes a single melodic voice, playing in support of a blues vocalist. While the structure of the bands varied inevitably, the groups led by William "Jazz" Gillum, Yank Rachell, Sonny Boy Williamson, Tampa Red, Joe Williams, Big Bill Broonzy, and Washboard Sam—to name but a few—would have an instrumentation drawn from drums, washboard, bass or imitation bass, guitar, piano, harmonica, and alto sax. It would be difficult to say exactly which musicians in these groups established a common thread for all of them. Such a key instrumentalist might be found in an unexpected quarter: in the ubiquitous Ransom Knowling, for example, the bass player whose driving but unobtrusive work is to be found at some time or another with most of these groups and many more besides, not excluding the Harlem Hamfats. Common to all are the guitarists, of whom Willie Lacey and Big Bill Broonzy—the latter thoroughly urbanized at this time in spite of his Mississippi origins and later recollections of his early work—were more than usually prolific. In almost all these bands those making the firmest contact with the music of the pre-depression era were the

pianists—Joshua Altheimer, Bob Call, Black Bob, Simeon Hatch, Honey Hill, Memphis Slim, Roosevelt Sykes, Eddie Boyd, Horace Malcomb, and Blind John Davis—some, like Sykes and Call, having recorded in those far-off days. Their boogie-woogie and slow piano styles, deeply rooted in the tradition of the twelve-bar blues, laid the firm foundations on which the new form of an old music was based. And of these pianists none was the peer of Major Merriweather.

Major Merriweather—or Big Maceo, as his friends called him - came to Chicago from Detroit in the late 19305. Whether his family was of Detroit origin or whether they came up from the south during the 'twenties when the labour demands in the factories in Detroit attracted large numbers of Negroes to the city, does not seem to be established. What importance can be attached to the verses of Big Maceo's *Texas Blues* (Bluebird B-8827) is a matter of conjecture:

My home's in Texas, what am I doin' up here?
My home's in Texas—what am I doin' up here?
Yes, my good corn whisky, baby, and women brought me here.

It is more than probable that this blues has as much significance as the favourite stand-by of the blues singer: "Born in Texas, raised in Tennessee . . ." Curiously enough, Maceo's three "solo" recordings are named after Detroit, Chicago, and Texas. If he did indeed come from that quarter it is unlikely, though not impossible, that he should have learned the rudiments of his music there. It is equally unlikely that he learned his music by listening to pianists in Chicago; far more probable that Detroit was the scene of his musical education, for when he started to record he was already an accomplished artist. That a school of boogie pianists existed m Detroit seems certain, but how important it was is difficult to assess, for little investigation has been made. The city's most famous son in the field of boogie and blues was Charlie Spand, who recorded fairly extensively in Chicago during the 'twenties. Spand was an unequal per former but his rendering of *Soon This Morning is* one of the most powerful examples of the music on record. Spand may have re turned to Detroit during the lean years, or he may be representative of a number of pianists of similar style. It would seem from purely circumstantial evidence that the origins of Big Maceo's formidable work may result from such an influence. Though he did not employ the same lightness of touch, there are echoes in his work of more than one recording by Leroy Carr, and if he did not learn from Carr personally he may well have learned much from his waxings.

That Maceo did benefit from the recordings that he heard is well demonstrated in his *Maceo's* 32-20 (Victor 20-2028), in which he uses note for note Little Brother Montgomery's celebrated *Vicksburg Blues,* but crushes the notes and growls the bass figures to even greater effect. No slavish copyist, Maceo sings an entirely dissimilar blues with a tune of quite a different character. The verses of this blues are usually aggressive in nature for Maceo, who has named the blues after the 32-20 bore revolver which is peculiarly favoured by Negroes, when, as Big Boy Crudup explains in his own *Give Me a* 32-20, it is "made on a .45 frame."

I walked all night long, with my 32-20 *in my hand [repeated]*
Lookin' for my u~oman, well I found her with another man,
She started screamin' "Murder!" an' I had never raised my hand
. *Tampa, she knew that I had them covered, 'cause I had the pistol right there in my hand*
. *I ain't no bully, an' I don't go for the baddest man in town.*
I ain't no bully, an' I ain't the baddest man in town.
When I catch a man with my woman, I usually tear his playhouse down.

Even here where some positive action is implied there is more' than a hint of the passivity that characterizes almost all the blues that Maceo recorded. From the blues that he sang and from the anecdotes told about him an impression is created of a man who canalized his emotions into words rather than actions. Though the theme of many of his blues may be fictitious and the women that he addresses in terms of rejection mere figments of the imagination, he still had a predilection for this type of material, a tendency which would present no problem to the psychologist. Anxiety, insecurity, the need for someone on whom to depend—these are the themes of his blues and, though it may be argued that they are the subjects of blues by innumerable singers, their constant recurrence to the exclusion of most of the other major themes is indicative of an essentially introvert nature. Maceo does not comment upon the world in which he lives nor upon the people with whom he has to live and work: he sings instead of himself and of his own feelings. Characteristically his very first recording under his own name was *Worried Life Blues* (Bluebird B8827):

So many nights, since you been gone
I been worryin' and grievin' my life along,
But some day, baby, I ain't gonna worry my life any more.

Notwithstanding this declaration, So *Worried, My Own Troubles, It's All Up to You, My Last Go Round.,* and *It's All Over Now* are among the blues which he subsequently recorded. The despairing note of the latter title is echoed in *Won't Be a Fool No More* (Victor 20-1870), in which he sings:

Everything I do, it looks like I do it wrong,
Sometimes I hate the day that I ever was born—
I'm so disgusted, I ain't got no place to go.
But if I ever get lucky, I won't be a biggy fool no more.
I don't have no money, ain't got no place to go—
The Good Book says you gotta reap just what you sow.
So I'm broke an' hungry, ramblin' from door to door,
But if I ever get lucky,

I won't be a biggy fool no more.

Whereas too much importance should not be attached to the surface values of his blues, following as many of them do the popular conventions of subject matter—promiscuous living, desertion, faithlessness, and so on—all of which are part of the stock in trade of the blues singer, the underlying motives for Maceo's thematic preferences can be readily deduced. He was one of a family of six children, a family man with wife and daughter, and when he sang, "Baby, I ain't goin' down that big road all by myself, if I don't catch you baby I'll just have to catch somebody else," he was underlining his need for the security of home and family life rather than displaying a disregard for one individual person. In his way of singing, no less than his lyrics, Maceo gives evidence of his disposition: his voice is sad, nostalgic, at times almost plaintive. He had a tweed-textured voice neither coarse nor smooth but with a certain rough ness of quality, blurred at the edges, soft but with substance. His voice had much of the same indistinct smokiness that is common to such singers as Peetie Wheatstraw or Brownie McGhee, but without the negligent ease of the former or the liveliness of the latter. In Merriweather's singing there is always present a degree of strain, and, as one listens, one can visualize the tightening of the throat muscles and the gathering frown at his brow. Not a handsome man, Maceo had a kindly face with small, sad eyes and well-moulded lids. Heavy of jaw and with a deep upper lip, he seldom permitted himself more than the faintest flicker of a smile in his photographs. Large features and a receding forehead gave him a somewhat bovine appearance which was sustained by his immense shoulders and powerful physique. Weighing all of 250 pounds, he had thick forearms and hands of considerable span. From such reserves of strength he drew the ability to create his Herculean bass figures, but his desire to do so stemmed from the proliferations of his own personality. In a man of lesser artistic stature and identical physical stature the need for action resulting from the circumstances which initiated his blues might have taken a violent form, but with Maceo such emotional reactions were sublimated in his playing and found expression in his dynamic blues improvisations.

Major Merriweather played the most puissant piano in jazz and had no need for instrumental support, but in fact he seldom played without at least a guitar for accompaniment. In Tampa Red he found a guitarist whose style was sympathetic to his own work, and a close friend in the man himself. Tampa Red was actually born in Atlanta, Georgia, but before coming North in the early 'twenties he spent some time in Tampa, Florida. When he eventually reached Chicago his real name of Hudson Whittaker was forgotten. In those early years he recorded prolifically as an accompanist to Ma Rainey, with his own Hokum band, and with numerous other "race" artists. At that time he had a bird-like liveliness which in his maturity gave place to a quieter disposition. Together they made an ideal team, and Maceo played piano with the more experienced guitarist at numerous clubs and cabarets, and at many informal party dates. Though not perhaps as popular today as they were more than a quarter of a century ago, the parlour socials of Harlem and the "Bronzeville" of Chicago still form a colourful part of the local scene. Like the "first generation" boogie pianists who emulated Pine Top Smith and his recording of *Pinetop's Boogie Woogie.* Big Maceo has re-created on record the atmosphere

of such a party and has recaptured its informality and the spontaneity of creation shared by the musicians. Against a rapid and unusual bass pattern Maceo plays a melodic riff on *Texas Stomp* which is fast and rippling but executed with strength as well as dexterity. It forms the basic melody line of the tune, and after a few bars Tampa Red joins in:

"Hey, Maceyl"
"Yeah, man?"
"What kind of jive d'ya call that?"
"Man I call this—is the 'Texas Stomp'."
"Texas Stomp?"
"Tha's right!"
"Say, you don' min' me an' T comin' up here to help ya out do ya?"
"No man, come up here with me now . . ."

Tampa Red joins in with strongly designed counter-melodies against the right-hand work of the pianist while "Little T"— Tyrell Dixon—accents a different rhythm on the drums. The force of Big Maceo's rhythmic and melodic lines was so consider able that such interweaving of rhythmic and melodic patterns was always possible and added greatly to the textural variety of his recordings. As the record progresses Maceo follows a familiar routine calling:

"Hey, Tampa! . . . See that girl over there in the corner?
Man, she can dance! Come here girl—show Tampa how you can Jello!' . . .
"She can cut it, can't she?"
"Yeah man. Come on Tampa, show me what you do in your home."
"This is the way we do it back in my home, Macey—listen here!"

and Tampa plays a singing chorus on his guitar against the driving piano background. On paper the words spoken are neither impressive nor important; their significance lies in their placing within the progress of the performance. The pauses, the exclamations, the emphasis on certain syllables are related intuitively to the music played. It is as if only the bare chassis of a blues was being driven with the music, with all superstructure, all vocal upholstery, all but the mere minimum stripped away. Before the record closes, Tyrell Dixon plays a succession of drum rhythms against a stop chorus. Then Tampa plays two whining notes, the bass rolls, and the piece swings on to the finish.

Detroit Jump, played to a forceful walking bass, is a continuation of the mood, with the informality of the session reaching the point where Maceo and Tampa are discussing plans for Maceo's return that October to Detroit. Without a doubt, how ever, Maceo's peak performance in fast boogie was his recording of *Chicago Breakdown* (Bluebird 34-0743), which must rank among the greatest examples of the music ever recorded. Tampa is again present and so is Chick Saunders on drums, but their contribution is scarcely noticeable, for Big Maceo, playing as one inspired, dominates the attention of the listener. A walking bass constitutes the fundamental rhythm, but there are in fact some four bass

figures employed, though the variations are only played for a few sudden bars each before the pianist returns unfalteringly to the basic left-hand pattern. Though played at a furious pace and with arm-wrecking power, the piece does not flag for an instant. Intricate treble variations succeed those of monumental simplicity, and their inter-relationship with the changing bass is unerring. From the first opening bars the "breakdown" rolls on inexorably to the end with such tremendous mastery of the idiom that the existence of this recording alone would establish Maceo's place in the hierarchy of jazz and blues.

Unlike a great many boogie pianists Merriweather was a master of the music in the slow and medium tempos as well as the fast. Most of the recordings under his own name were in the slower tempos, and all are notable for the rock-like solidity of the basses. The treble passages were generally simple and unadventurous behind the voice and had more decorative value i n the breaks between the lines. It was in the free solo choruses which he usually introduced into his recordings that Maceo displayed his pianistic inventiveness, but whether elaborate or stark in their plainness, his improvisations had inherent blues feeling, as such recordings as *Tuff Luck Blues* or Why *Should I Hang Around* amply demonstrate.

As an accompanist to other singers Maceo excelled, and with his attention undivided he created blues of majestic beauty on recordings by several artists. Tampa Red recorded a great many blues, and on a large number of these he had the support of his friend. *Don't Deal with the Devil* is a characteristic blues song composed by Tampa, which shows in its warning theme his more extrovert temperament. Big Maceo plays the introduction and settles down to a superbly blue accompaniment in 4/4 time, with a rolling foundation played by the left hand. To Tampa's "Play that thing, boy," he responds with a change to the boogie bass, and while Whittaker continues to call, "I got that, Maceo. I hear you on that piano, boy! Git it now! Play those blues, boy," he fabricates his variations with grim purposefulness. The devices of *Don't Deal with the Devil (* Bluebird B-8ggl) are used to even more devastating effect in Tampa Red's *I Can't Get Along With You (* Bluebird 34-o748), in which the guitarist half-sings, half-shouts his accusing angry verses. From the start Maceo's ominous, thunderous piano sets the for bidding mood of the song, each verse of which is divided into halves, the first punctuated by an arresting stop chorus, and the second half played to a grumbling boogie. When Tampa reaches for his kazoo and blows a fierce chorus, Maceo supports him in like manner and he can be heard shouting, "Lay it on me, Tampa!"—the phrase which seems to have a code-like significance to the two musicians so frequently do they use it. The year 1945 was the peak in Maceo's recording activity, and besides the many couplings that he made with Tampa Red under their respective names, he recorded a number of sides with Big Bill Broonzy, whom he had met in 1941. Though a number of these are unissued, the fastish version of *Roll dem Bones* displays Maceo to advantage (Columbia 36879). Of the remainder several were recorded with Buster Bennett on alto. *Partnership Woman,* though dominated by Broonzy, has fine work by Maceo, but the record (Columbia 30143) is somewhat marred by the presence of the saxophonist. A good friend of Broonzy's, Maceo played with him on a number of club dates, but he does not appear as much in sympathy with him as with Tampa, just as Broonzy was happiest with Joshua Altheimer. Less applauded than the

team of Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell, such guitar-piano duos as these are of scarcely less importance. That Maceo's recordings with Sonny Boy William son are more successful is not surprising, therefore, since they have both Tampa Red and Chick Saunders, and it is of interest to note that they were made at the session that produced *Chicago Breakdown.* On *The Big Boat* (Victor 20-3218) or *Stop Breaking Down* (Victor 20-3047) Maceo gets no opportunity to solo, and Williamson's vocal or harmonica is to be heard through out the sides. Nevertheless, Merriweather's contribution is considerable; an Atlas who could carry the whole rhythm, he lays a firm foundation the worth of which becoming readily apparent when these recordings are compared with those in which the far from negligible John Davis or Eddie Boyd play. In the subsequent two years Maceo appeared with Tampa Red at the Flame Club in Chicago—the nightspot where Sonny Boy Williamson played on the night of his murder. But now his health was beginning to break up. Some evidence of this is to be found on his recordings with Jazz Gillum made in 1946, for although he still plays with much of his past strength his ideas on such sides as *Keep on Sailing* (Bluebird 34-0747) seem on the wane. For his friends, and particularly for Tampa Red, who had known him so intimately, the break-up of his health must have been almost as distressing as it was for his family. Late that year he suffered a stroke which left him partially paralyzed. Recovering to a degree, he made the sad sides in which Eddie Boyd played the piano while Maceo sang, and during the next couple of years he played when he could and sang intermittently, even making one more vocal session for Specialty early in 1949. Then came the final paralytic stroke from which he never recovered, and on February 26th, 1953, at the early age of forty eight, he died. A major figure in a minor art, Big Maceo had arrived at the day when he would not have to "worry his life any more."

(From Jazz Monthly, August 1957 pps. 7-10, less illustrations)