

**JESSE CRUMP**  
**Piano Behind The Blues**  
**Warren C. Huddleston**

The place is the dim living-room of an old-fashioned residence on First Street in Muncie, Indiana. Jesse Crump is seated across the room from us, talking quietly. Called "Tiny" now, he's a tall, heavy man, composed and dignified. His eyes are concentrated on times and places that are far away. He's looking back across the crowded, wandering years of his life as a piano player and entertainer ... back to his boyhood days in Dallas, Texas.

"I was always crazy about music. Music was in me from the beginning. When I was a kid back in Texas, I played on anything I could get a sound out of - bottles, a flute, an organ, a clarinet. Went to a circus once. There was a man made music out of bottles with water in them. I came home and got me some bottles and put water in them and made me music the same way. Just bottles with water.

"My mother played the organ, and when she wasn't home I fooled around with it, just picked out little tunes. Had no trouble at all. The sounds were in my mind. Picked out chords, and learned a little about variation of notes.

"Went to a music teacher, and after she listened to me awhile she told me there was nothing she could teach me. Said that all I needed was some finger practice."

During some thirteen years on the road with TOB.( the .Negro vaudeville circuit ), Jesse Crump got plenty of practice. He left Dallas when just a boy, in about 1919. Since then he's played piano all over the TOBA circuit, and off the circuit in Kansas City, Chicago, Indianapolis and Muncie, Los Angeles and San Francisco and Monterey. He never went back to Dallas.

But let Jesse tell more of his story. This time he's back in Chicago: "Decided I wanted to learn how to write music, so I tested myself. Tried to write out a tune. Sat down and wrote out the music for *Home, Sweet Home*, then I went to the piano and played what I'd put on the paper. It was *Home, Sweet Home*, sure enough. So I knew how to write music."

Crump has been composing music ever since. He wrote many of the Ida Cox tunes, including *Death Letter Blues*, *Black Crepe Blues*, *Cherry Pickin' Blues*, and *Last Mile Blues*. Most of the tunes on the records Ida Cox made for Paramount with Jesse as accompanist are Crump originals.

We've brought along a few of Jesse's records, that he hasn't heard for fifteen years or more, and now he asks to hear them. First we play *Mr. Crump's Rag*, Jesse's first record, his only solo piano record. Pure ragtime comes from the speaker, the tinkling notes moving with slow grract. Jesse's head drops lower, and he moves in as close to the speaker as he can get. His eyes are half closed. He's back on the Avenue in Indianapolis—pleasing the people at the Golden West Cafe. The year is 1923... Then we

play in rapid succession the other solo side, a slow blues called *Golden West Blues*, and the sides he made accompanying Nina Reeves, *Indiana Avenue Blues* and *Louisville Lou*. These two records he recalls, resulted from a session at ~Richmond, Indiana. that followed by a day or two Morton's first Gennett piano solo session. So that brings up the subject of Jelly Roll:

"Never did meet Jelly in Richmond. Didn't know we were in that studio so close together. Knew him, all right. He was a big mouth guy. Sure was a pistol. Thought nobody in the world but him could play piano. Always liked his *Jelly Roll Blues*. It's a mighty fine tune, and ought to be recorded more."

After we'd listened to *African Rag*, issued by Paramount and listed as by an unknown piano player, Jesse Crump's comment was: "That might be Dave Peyton. Sounds kind of like him. Don't think it's James P. Johnson. Clarence Jones was another good piano player around Chicago back in those days. He could read music and play anything. Jimmy Blythe was an off-and-on piano player, but when he was good he was good. His *Mecca Flat* is a very nice tune—about the best he ever wrote.

"Lots of good piano players around Indianapolis when I was there. I can remember Russell Smith, Russell Williams, Frank Hines and Hanby ... don't remember the rest of his name. That was a good town for piano players when I was at the Golden West."

Now Jesse Crump is seated at the piano. He clenches and unclenches his hands. His fingers poise above the keyboard, then drop towards the keys. The tune is one we've just listened to *Mr. Crump's Rag*.

"Call it *Tiny Fingers* now," Jesse said. "Friend of mine here in Muncie renamed it for me. That tune goes a long ways back. It was always one that I liked best."

Then he moves into a boogie tune, and as we listened it becomes *Yancey Special*. Next *Honeysuckle Rose* and *The World is Waiting for the Sunrise*, the latter an original composition with a rolling boogie base. Both are altered and charged and alive with the creative power in Crump's fingers.

"Mostly played back of a singer, but played a lot of solo piano. Now and then had me a combo. Had one five-piece outfit called Jesse Crump and His Cain Raisers. That was the first colored unit to play at te Pickwick Hotel radio station in Kansas City. Opened the way for colored entertainers.

"I've played around Los Angeles and Frisco quite a bit. New Orleans Swing Club in Frisco was the last place I played on the Coast. (This interview took place last fall; currently Crump is living in San Francisco and playing at te Copa Club in Monterey. ) I've been around Muncie off and on ever since 1937. Owned my own place for awhile. Then I played the 1100 Club, Main Café, Hollywood Bar and Candlelight all in Muncie. At one place they had a big sign out: 'The Man Who Plays with a Thousand Bands.' That man was me, accompanying a juke box."

Crump grinned broadly, and went on to talk about the job he was on the day of our visit. He was playing solo piano at a local spot ... blues, boogie, hillbilly, pop. All the request stuff. The bar was next to the railroad yards, and Jesse's piano was forced to compete with switch engines and the constant clash of shuttling freight cars. We went out later to listen to him, and the music was still good music. It pleased us, and it pleased the people.

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