

In the 1930's, the sound of boogie-woogie piano was everywhere. Any respectable – and some not so respectable – pianist had some boogie-woogie tunes in their repertoire, and these songs were often among their most popular. Unlike either ragtime or stride, boogie-woogie's fast tempos and repetitive bass lines made it ideal dance music, and its eight-to-the-bar bass lines allowed a single piano player to make its joyful rhythms come to life.

Today, boogie-woogie piano is not a staple of radio or dance halls, yet it remains very much alive, preached by a handful of practitioners who pour their heart and soul into its boisterous rhythms and tuneful melodies. Among them is pianist Mark Braun, who organizes the annual Blues and Boogie Piano Celebration in Ann Arbor, Michigan. In the hands of Braun, and fellow devotees like Bob Seeley and Johnny O'Neal, the art of boogie-woogie piano is alive and well, thrilling and uplifting audiences with a sound that resonates deep within the human spirit.

Jamaican-born pianist Monty Alexander is one such spirit, touched early on

by the power of boogie-woogie. Alexander was inspired to organize this recording of boogie-woogie masters after attending Braun's annual festival. "When I first started out as a pianist, this was a style that I often played," Alexander recalls. "I studied it seriously, and I loved rockin' the joint. Listening to these artists, I was reminded of how much people love hearing this music, how the sound of the solo piano can create such a fervor and stir people's hearts."

Along with boogie-woogie, the sounds of gospel naturally worked their way into this project as well. Not surprisingly, the pianists who participated in this recording – Braun, Alexander, Detroit's Johnny O'Neal, Michigan's Bob Seeley, and Philadelphia native Eric Reed – all have deep musical and spiritual roots. There is, after all a fine line between the sacred and the secular. The celebrated Hollywood movie, *Ray* – in which O'Neal portrays piano great Art Tatum – explores the consequences of Ray Charles' bringing the sounds of the church into secular music, to the delight of some and the con-

sternation of others. And, as heard in performances by Reed, O'Neal, and Seeley, both boogie-woogie and gospel are intricately linked, two sides of a single magical coin. Both can light up a room, warm the heart, and stir emotions like nothing else.

Which is to say that while boogie-woogie piano may not be heard much on the radio or in local clubs, it remains a vibrant and moving art form. Listen to these grooves, and marvel at how two hands alone can create a sound so dense, so exciting, that it resonates with the power of an entire big band orchestra. "This stuff is not some repertory music, this music is vibrant, and these guys are rockin' and burning," says Alexander. "Boogie-woogie is no museum piece. It's alive and well in the hands of the current masters, who give it new life every time they sit down at the piano."

Can someone say "Amen?"

—Steven Graybow

