

GEORGE WINSTON On Booker

This is a reissue of James Booker's first album produced in 1975 by Joe Boyd. His beautiful piano playing was very effectively recorded by John Wood (you can feel some of the bass notes). He was musically fluent in all 12 major and minor keys. He was an outstanding organist as well, and his piano playing reflects that, especially in his left-hand bass lines and his use of righthand, full-sounding chords and voicings. His playing covered at least seven separate styles:

1. An R&B band style, with a single note bass line and a partial chord in the left hand played within a hand span of an octave or a 10th interval. (On this album you can hear this style on *Good Night Irene*, *Pixie*, *Make a Better World*, *Junco Parmer*, *Blues Minuet* and *Pop's Dilemma*.)

2. A medium tempo, hard swinging stride style (stride piano meaning the left hand plays a bass on the on beat and then "strides" or jumps up to a chord on the off beat) with the root note and 5th below that played simultaneously just before the beat and the lower root note played on the beat. He played both standards and R&B pieces in this style (*Sunny Side of the Street* on this album).

3. A slow and medium slow stride style with 10ths in the left hand, preceded often by a fast chromatic roll, and the right hand playing bluesy fills and occasionally jazz lines (*Until the Real Thing Comes Along*/*Baby Won't You Please Come Home*, *I'll Be Seeing You* on this album).

4. A rock stride style (*Put Out the Light* on this album).

5. A romantic, classically-influenced style (*Black Minuet Waltz*, *I'll Be Seeing You* on this album).

6. An organ-influenced style (not represented on this recording) with the octave bass line sparse and the right hand consistently going, often with choppy rhythms. James played another version of *Junco Parmer* in this style, as well as *Papa Was a Rascal*.

7. A speeded-up version of his R&B band style (not represented on this recording), again with the bass line and partial chord in the left hand within a hand span. He sometimes used this style to play ragtime-type pieces and older pop songs such as *Baby Face* and *Sweet Georgia Brown*.

THE SONGS

Black Minuet Waltz (C = Major) In this unique version of the Chopin piece, James uses solid left-hand 10ths with very soulful right-hand fills. He squeezes great feeling out of the piano when he uses his trademark hesitations.

Good Night Irene (C = Major) This remarkable interpretation shows his solid, pulsing left-hand R&B bass with his clean, choppy right-hand rolls. The pulsing end drone-type feeling was influenced by his own organ playing. Listen to his equally notable dialogue in the beginning about Angola State Prison.

Pixie (Eb Major) A Booker original, sometimes with four parts played simultaneously. I can feel the heat rising off the pavement on this piece. The left hand plays the bass and partial chord while the right hand plays a lead part, throwing in a rhythm chord in between the lead fragments. This right-hand part is reminiscent of how the great jazz guitarist Wes Montgomery would play a chord in spaces between his melodic lines. In the last section of this piece, he very effectively answers himself with statements in alternating Bb and Eb chords, playing the right-hand riffs in the respective key of the left-hand chord. James often simulated a pianist with three hands, as he does here. Another great example of his "three-handed technique" is his version of *Life* on the LP *Piano Prince From New Orleans* (Aves 146.509 - German import). When he begins *Life* it sounds as though both hands are playing what is actually just the left hand. When the right hand comes in it is stunning.

Sunny Side of the Street (Eb Major) James' unique way of playing stride piano has a rock-solid swing feeling. It involves the left hand playing an octave with a fifth in the middle; the upper two notes are played just before the beat and the low note on the beat. Sometimes he does the same thing with a 10th interval, with the 10th and 5th played just before the beat. The right-hand melody chords show an Erroll Garner influence.

Make a Better World (C Major) A great interpretation of the Earl King original, with a message which very much reflected James' feelings. This shows James' piano simulating a whole R&B band, with the bass and rhythm chord in the left hand and clean strong riffs in the right hand. Here again his own organ playing was an influence. The little finger of his left hand plays the organ bass-pedal part, while his thumb and index finger of his left hand play the rhythm chord that he would play on the organ with his left hand. His right hand at times plays intense "grace" chords 1/2 step below the resolving chord creating a full, organ-like effect. Listen to his great instrumental break in the middle. And listen to how much he gets out of the two chords that make up this song.

James often used very rapid right-hand rolls. These were executed as if they were one note or chord, using different combinations between 3 and 16 notes, usually starting with 2 notes struck simultaneously (these were either a minor 3rd, 4th, a diminished 5th, a 5th, a minor 6th, a major 7th, or an octave). He had a large vocabulary of these rolls with many variations on each.

Some of the influences for these rolls came from Professor Longhair (you can hear them on the songs from 1949 *Hey Little Girl* and *Hey Now Baby* on the album *New Orleans Piano*, Atlantic SD-7225). Another influence for this may have been boogie-woogie pianist Meade "Lux" Lewis' classic *Honky Tonk Train Blues*. (Lewis recorded this several times, and the versions are available on several different albums. Three of the best versions were the tracks from December, 1927, November 21, 1935, and March 7, 1937.)

Junco Partner (G Major) This New Orleans R&B staple was one of James' most popular interpretations, and his own addition to the lyrics chronicles problems he had earlier in his life which he struggled to overcome. Note the solid organ bass-pedal type of line in the left hand. For two other completely different interpretations of this song, you can hear Dr. John's version on his *GUMBO* album (reissued on Alligator AL3901) and Professor Longhair's version on *Rock 'n' Roll Gumbo* (Dancing Cat DC-3006). James also had another way of playing this piece in a more choppy rhythm often in the key of Bb as well as the key of G.

Put Out the Light (Ab Major) A powerful stride piano/R&B original. James' modulations from Ab Major to A minor and back to Ab Major in the middle section are remarkable for their continuity, given the fact that this is an unusual modulation.

Medley: Blues Minuet / Until the Real Thing Comes Along / Baby Won't You Please Come Home - James' medleys were very effective and often surprising.

Blues Minuet (C Major) Another powerful R&B-tinged original. Notice the great modulation to the key of Eb at the end of this first piece of the medley.

Until the Real Thing Comes Along (Eb Major) / *Baby Won't You Please Come Home* (Bb Major) These show James' slow stride style, using 10ths in the bass, often preceded by rolls of the top of the 10th just before hitting the bass note on the beat. He had a number of these that he played, including hitting the 10th alone just before the beat, with the lower 5th and root hitting together on the beat, as well as hitting the 5th and the 10th on the end of the roll just before the beat. Sometimes he would play the 5th and 10th of the chord 1/2 step below before the beat, then hit the 10th on the beat. He also used many combinations of the left hand and right hand: playing various rolls simultaneously; or sometimes using many hesitations of different timings with either hand or both hands

together; or with both hands playing at the same time, but with different timings in each one. Especially listen to his right-hand fills on *Baby Won't You Please Come Home*.

Pop's Dilemma (Bb Major) In this song by his father, James Booker, Jr., James III transforms what was probably originally a ragtime feeling into a rocking R&B piece. His left hand rocks steady while the right hand plays with and against it.

I'll Be Seeing You (Eb Major) This piece was Liberace's closing theme song; both Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby had hits with it in 1944. James' version begins with a great classically-influenced, orchestral-type crescendo and changes into a medium-slow stride style. James sometimes referred to himself as the "Black Liberace," implying that he was liable to play almost any song, and that he embellished the melody with a variety of rhythms and soulful, bluesy rolling fills, the R&F version of Liberace's classically-oriented arpeggios and fills.

As great as this album is, it only tells a small portion of the whole story of James Booker. Even with the other albums he has released, much more needs to be told. There are many, many hours of live tapes of James, and hopefully some of these tracks will be issued in the future.

However, of all of these hundreds of hours of live tapes I have heard, I feel that this album contains the best versions of most of these particular songs.

George Winston
July, 1992

Recorded at Sea-Saint Studios, New Orleans, February 1976

Engineer: John Wood
Produced by Joe Boyd and John Wood
Photography: Michael P. Smith
Design: Conrad Warre

Some other recommended James Booker albums:

New Orleans Piano Wizard: Live!
(Rounder 2027) - available on CD
Piano Prince Of New Orleans
(Aves 146.509)-(German release)
King Of The New Orleans Keyboard - Vol 1
(JSP 1083)(English release)
King Of The New Orleans Keyboard - Vol 11
(JSP 1086) (English release) - both of these albums have been released as a combined CD on JSP (JP1)
Blues and Ragtime From New Orleans
(Aves 146.530)(German release)
Classified (Rounder 2036)