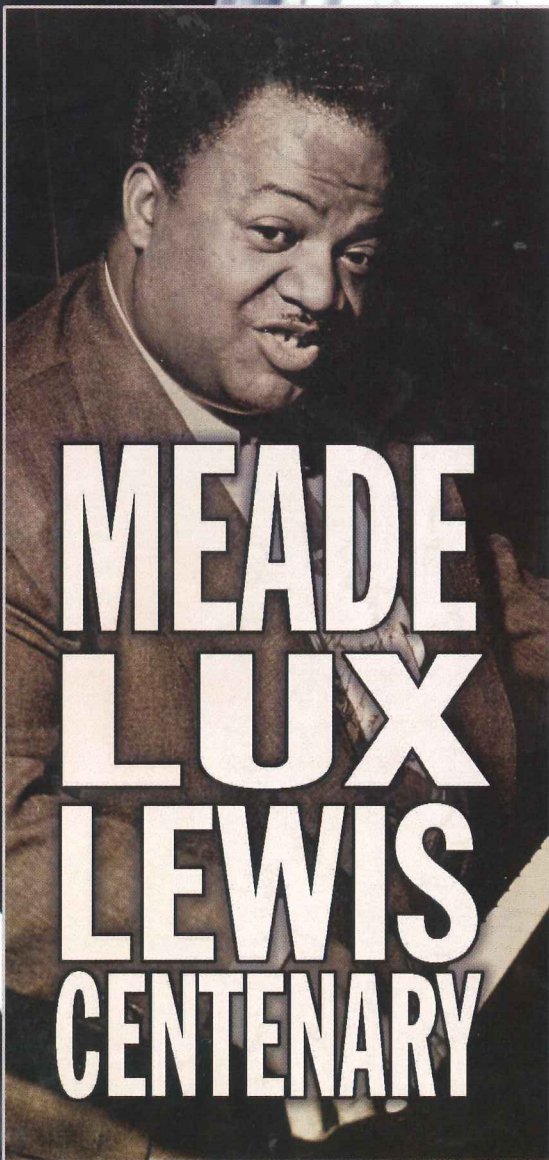


# BLUES & RHYTHM

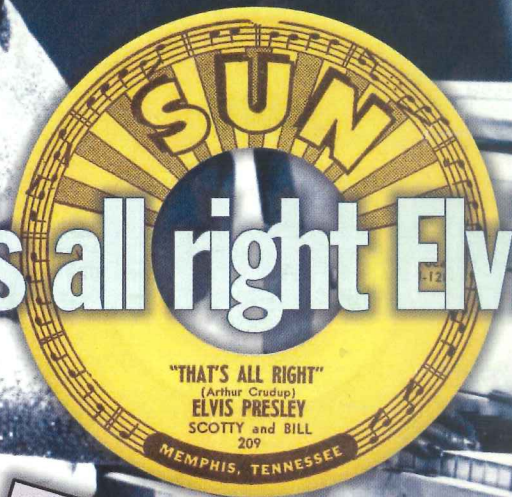
## Sister Rosetta Tharpe



**MEADE  
LUX  
LEWIS  
CENTENARY**



**That's all right Elvis**



**R&B in the 50s**

# TELL MY STORY

The life and the music of Meade Lux Lewis,  
celebrating his 100th birthday

By Michi Hortig



Meade Lux Lewis

Meade Lux Lewis, circa 1938. Courtesy Denise Buckner

In the early 1930s, when John Hammond Sr., the noted jazz collector and promoter first heard a copy of 'Honky Tonk Train Blues' (Paramount 12896), played by Meade Lux Lewis, he could hardly imagine that this incident would lead some years later to the nationwide boom of boogie-woogie music.

Meade Anderson Lewis was born in Chicago on 4th September, 1905 to George A. and Hattie (maiden name Johnson) Lewis. He had two older brothers Joseph and Milard, a younger brother Julius and a sister Bessie (whose married name was Gordon). His father, who worked as a porter on the New York Central Line, played guitar and was fond of the music of bandleader and violin player Erskine Tate. He arranged for Meade to have violin lessons but shortly after his father's death he stopped playing violin and switched to the piano. At this time he had known Albert Ammons for some years, both attended Webster School on the Southside of Chicago. Their first contact with the piano was with 'player pianos'. "We use to unlock the keys as they went down and learn different tunes by taking a pencil and marking the keys. Then we'd stop the player and place our finger upon the keys we had marked. We found out that was a chord and we just continuously kept doing that until the thing caught."

At that time Lewis was very much interested in automobile mechanics, but when an unknown pianist called Al came up from St. Louis, bringing the number 'The Fives' to Chicago, he returned to the piano. "So I told Al, I gotta learn how to play that stuff; let's get together." In 1924 the Lewis family moved to Louisville, Kentucky, the birthplace of Lewis's mother, and when they returned some time later, the Lewis family had split – Milard and his family moved to Minneapolis, Joseph stayed in Louisville and Meade, Julius and Bessie returned to Chicago. During the next years he and Albert Ammons had various jobs, playing piano, driving taxis and during the toughest years of the depression, washing cars. In his own words, "My shoes were so thin, that I could step on a dime and tell you whether it was heads or tails."

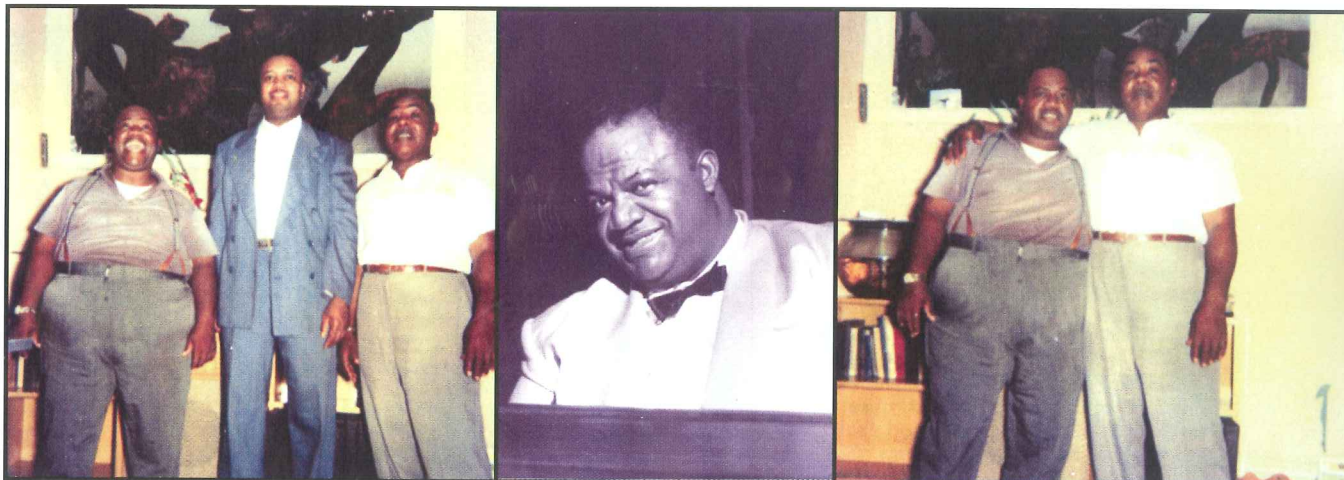
## HONKY TONK TRAIN BLUES

In 1927, at a rent party, Lewis became acquainted with a girl named Amelia who worked for a publishing company with connections to the Paramount Record Company. She liked Lewis's playing and arranged a recording session, which took place in December 1927 at the Paramount studios on Wabash Avenue, one year before Pinetop Smith recorded his famous 'Pinetop Boogie Woogie'. "I called it the 'Freight Train' but the engineer said: 'Oh no, that sounds like Honky Tonk music. We'll call it 'Honky Tonk Train Blues'."

His next recordings were as an accompanist on four sides with (singers) George Hannah in October 1930 and five issued sides with Bob Robinson in November, 1930. From then he had several jobs, including driving for a dress salesman, with whom he travelled from 1934 until mid-1935. After his return to Chicago and with the help of his old schoolmate Albert Ammons, he joined a trio and began to get known on the Southside. At the time when John Hammond asked Ammons about the whereabouts of Lewis, he had a trio called Lux And His Chips



Meade Lux Lewis' mother front left. Courtesy Denise Buckner



Top left: Meade Lux Lewis with his brothers Milard and Julius. Top middle, at the piano; Top right: with brother Julius; Below right; with friends. All circa 1960s in Minneapolis. Courtesy Denise Buckner

playing at a place called Doc Huggins'. "He (Hammond) came over there and he listened to me play. So finally he told the waitress to tell me to play the 'Honky Tonk Train Blues', so I played it."

Lewis agreed to record the number again, and the session was arranged on 21st November, 1935, for the UK based Parlophone Record Company. In the spring of 1936 Benny Goodman was appearing at the Congress Hotel in Chicago. While there, he, Johnny Mercer and John Hammond went to hear Lewis at Doc Huggins. Hammond later reported the occasion thus: "One blues took more than fifty minutes and the 'Honky Tonk Train' ran for more than half an hour." His first trip to New York in May 1936 to play at the first 'Swing Concert' was not a success, as he had to play on a new grand piano and nobody knew him or the boogie-woogie style.

His next recording session, on the 11th January, 1936, for the American Decca Company produced his second hit, 'Yancey Special', and on the 7th May, 1937, he cut two titles for Victor – 'Honky Tonk Train' again and his famous 'Whistlin' Blues'. These recordings, and the commercially successful release of 'Yancey Special' by the Bob Crosby Orchestra in 1938, brought Lewis's name to a larger audience.

His break came with the invitation to play at the first 'From Spirituals To Swing' concert, which was held on 23rd December 1938, in New York at Carnegie Hall. Together with his fellow pianists Albert Ammons and Pete Johnson and the singer Big Joe Turner, boogie-woogie became a nationwide craze, which lasted for the next couple of years. Dubbed the 'Boogie Woogie Trio' they became stars at nightclubs like the Cafe Society in New York and the Hotel Sherman in Chicago. A number of recording sessions for Solo Art, Vocalion and the newly established Blue Note label followed and their live appearances were broadcast. It seems that Lewis, who always had been a solo-performer, left the Trio and went to California in the middle of 1941 in order to get better jobs out there, sometimes in company with Big Joe Turner. With the help of Downbeat magazine he became a member of ASCAP (Association of Song Composers, Authors and Publishers).



#### JAZZ AT THE PHILHARMONIC

Between 1941 and 1946 Lewis cut four short soundies, appeared on several Jubilee radio shows, recorded three numbers for V-Disc, and cut several records for the Asch Company. 1946 was a big year for Lewis, he was part of the second Jazz At The Philharmonic (the first one was in 1944, where a two disc album of his live recordings had been issued), which toured the United States. He had a short sequence on 'It's A Wonderful Life' featuring James Stewart, and appeared playing 'Honky Tonk Train Blues' in the film 'New Orleans' with Louis Armstrong.

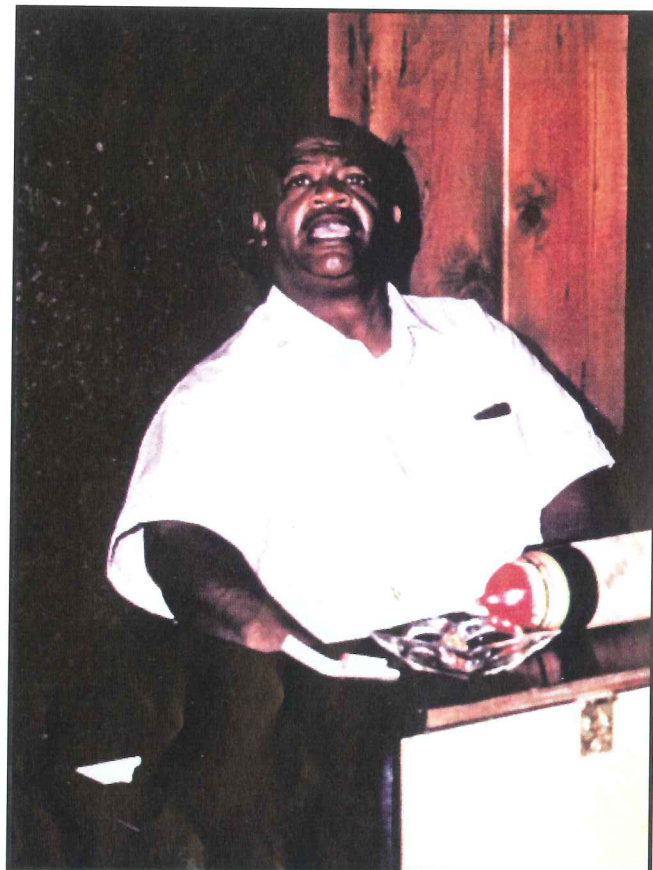
During the next decade Lewis kept on playing at various clubs and bars, not only in the Los Angeles area, but as far as Detroit and New York because as he said "The money is right and I get to play the way I want." In 1952 the Gale Organisation organised the 'Piano Parade Tour' with Lewis, Pete Johnson, Art Tatum and Errol Garner, playing across the USA and Canada. Afterwards Lewis teamed up with Johnson and they played together for some time. When he returned to the West Coast, he was engaged at Club Hangover for eighteen months and made several broadcasts from there. During the 1950s and early 1960s, he continued his club work and recorded several albums; for Atlantic in 1951, Verve in 1955, ABC and Tops in 1956 and Riverside and Philips in 1961.

In the early 1960s he appeared on TV shows such as the 'Roaring Twenties', the Steve Allen Show and on an NBC produced, two part TV special entitled 'Chicago And All That Jazz', where he played 'Honky Tonk Train Blues' and a high speed version of 'Pinetop's Boogie'. He also was asked twice by agents to tour Europe but he said: "They don't want to pay any money, they want you to do it for nothin'!"

He got invitations to play in New York and New Orleans, he liked to play in Minneapolis, as the family of his brother lived there. He had plans to leave Los Angeles and settle there as he enjoyed the climate. He was often invited to play at the White House Restaurant in the suburb of Minneapolis and it was on 7th June, 1964, when, after finishing a concert there, his car was hit by a drunken driver. He was thrown from the car, hit a tree and was killed immediately. This tragedy happened only some months before Lewis was scheduled for an appearance at a major jazz festival in Berlin.



Signed copy of Blues Note 15. Courtesy Michi Hortig.



### A UNIQUE MUSICIAN

At his peak Meade Lux Lewis weighed 298 pounds and stood 5' 6" tall. In contrast to his partners, Albert Ammons and Pete Johnson, he stopped drinking hard liquor, began medical treatment and had a regulated diet. Another quality that was very rare – he managed his money well. Unlike Duke Ellington, Count Basie or Lionel Hampton, he had never been in the front row of black entertainment, but from the late 1930s he was the most popular artist in the boogie-woogie field, which not only brought stardom of sorts, but he was also financially secure. He bought a house in the suburbs of Los Angeles, was fond of big cars, buying a new one every three years, and supported his brother's family whenever he came to Minneapolis. He was generally



regarded as a jovial person, friendly and cordial. The most apt word to describe the music of Meade Lux Lewis is 'unique'. Compared with Ammons and Johnson, he was strictly a solo performer, recording only a few times with larger groups (eg. in support of Edmond Hall or Helen Humes). From observers who saw him perform in person or from concert recordings, we know his playing before audiences was harder and stronger than his studio recordings. Sometimes it's said, club owners complained that Lewis scarred the woodwork behind the keys with his fingernails while playing furiously.

Meade Lux Lewis recorded from 1927 to 1964. His recordings can be classified into three periods: the blues years – up to 1939; the boogie-woogie years – up to 1954; and variations on themes – up to 1964. During the 1939 sessions for Solo Art and Blue Note, he recorded many slow blues tunes and some medium pieces with stride bass patterns.

Due to his success at the 'Spirituals To Swing' concerts there was a demand for more boogie numbers. During this period, considered his musical peak, he recorded some of the masterpieces of the boogie-woogie idiom including 'Six Wheel Chaser', 'Chicago Flyer', 'Tell Your Story' and the best version of 'Honky Tonk Train Blues'. During the first two periods, he also made several recordings on the celeste and the harpsichord.

However, by the end of the 1940s 'Honky Tonk Train' was being played faster and flashier with the new 4/4 time chording in the left hand. He melded other numbers into two standards, 'Six Wheel Chaser' and 'Lux Boogie', which seem only to differ in the opening chords.

In 1951 he recorded an album for Atlantic, 'Meade Lux Lewis Interprets The Great Boogie Woogie Masters', where he played easygoing versions of Hershell Thomas's 'Suitcase Blues' and Davenport's 'Cow Cow Blues'. The biggest change came when Lewis changed his repertoire to playing standards, played with either stride or single note bass patterns. Some said he was forced by club owners to do so, as boogie-woogie music was out of date by the mid 1950s. Others have said that during this period, Lewis started to record for bigger recording companies, and they tried to update his style. His last issued albums had been recorded in November 1961 in New York. The first one a bluesy album, the second 'House Party', a mix of boogie tunes accompanied by a group consisting of guitar, horns and drums. Rumour has it that these instruments were overdubbed later.

Some weeks before his death, a short appearance at a Los Angeles club was privately recorded, showing Lewis to be still in demand, creating fantastic music and entertaining the audience.

**Thanks to Denise Buckner (grand-niece of Meade Lux Lewis) for providing information and the photos used in this article, Also to Charley Booty, Charley Castner, Maximilian Gmeiner, Phil Kiely, Dick Muhlitz, Dr. Konrad Nowakowski, Bob Seeley, Peter Sylvester and Axel Zwingerberger.**

*Photos on this page: Meade Lux Lewis, Minneapolis, circa 1960s. Courtesy Denise Buckner*