

STOMP THE GRINDER DOWN

TEXAS BLUES PIANO
PART ONE
BY MICHAEL HORTIG



Barrelhouse circa 1930s. From the B&R Archives.

Quite by chance I found the 'Online Texas Death Index', where death certificates from 1890 to 1976 are available. Much biographical data of little known pianists such as Black Boy Shine, Bessie Tucker, and Wilson 'Thunder' Smith have been found, providing the background for this two-part article on Texas Blues Piano.

Texas always had a big blues tradition – Ramblin' Thomas, Texas Alexander and Blind Lemon Jefferson – some of the most significant early blues artists came from Texas. While the black population from other regions in the south like Mississippi or Alabama migrated north to Chicago, Memphis or St. Louis, the Texas population had big cities in their own state, like Houston, Shreveport or Dallas. The black population in Dallas increased from 9,000 in 1899 to 50,000 in 1930. However not only the big cities provided work. Texas was rich with many kinds of industry. The oil country around Houston or Beaumont, the sugar-refineries in Fort Bend County, seaports like Galveston, and lumber and turpentine industries in the eastern parts, bordering the state line with Louisiana, and all those connected with legendary railroad lines like the 'Santa Fe', 'Rock Island' or the 'Texas & Pacific'.

This provided the background to entertainment such as drinking, gambling, whoring, and dancing, with a great demand for musicians, especially piano players. Entertainment could be found in often rough

and violent barrelhouses, where cheap booze was drawn direct from the barrel: "Up and down the Santa Fe tracks in those days, these were known as the barrelhouse joints. You play all night long, and they danced all night long. And the blues was all they wanted" – (Buster Pickens).

After the pianists had finished, they rode the train to the next job: "These other piano players, Son Becky, Andy Boy, Conish Burks, they went out different routes, hardly ever paired up, each lookin' for his own bread" – (Buster Pickens).

Many of them were crippled from riding the blinds, like the legendary Peg Leg Will. Others were murdered like Wilson Smith and Buster Pickens, or died of pneumonia and TB: "You play in those hot places and run out in the cold and chill air . . . gives you pneumonia".

NB: The blinds were the walkway between two passenger cars covered with either canvas or leather in an accordion shape, there was a ladder running up to the top of the car in this space and the hoboos would hold on to the ladder.

All this led to a very distinctive style of blues piano playing with a variety of stride, boogie or chorded patterns in the left, and a technically high standard of melodic structures in the right hand. They also didn't use only the eight or twelve bar forms, usually used by blues pianists of their time, they had nine, eleven, thirteen, fourteen or even 24 bar forms.

The first Texas pianist to record seems to be Bert M. Mays, who recorded four titles in Chicago in November/December 1927 for Paramount. His playing and his use of piano and vocal-effects puts him close to a group

of Dallas based musicians who recorded between 1927 and 1929. In 1928 and 1929 Mays recorded ten more titles for Vocalion, from which only two have been released.

Although he recorded an 'Atlanta Blues', a 'Milwaukee Scrontch' and a 'Michigan River Blues', his version of 'You Can't Come In' suggests a southern background.

Between 1927 and 1929, Columbia made recording trips to Dallas, where they recorded Dallas based musicians like Whistlin' Alex Moore (see Part II), Texas Bill Day, and Willie Tyson. Around 'Deep Ellum' or 'Central Tracks', the heart of Dallas' black community, the pianists created their own 'Dallas style', slow or medium-paced and 'Bucket Of Blood' was a celebrated number. Joe and Fred Curtis, Frankie Allen, and Bobby Bryant were familiar names, but never got the chance to record.

About Texas Bill Day, nothing is known; Alex Moore remembered a Bill Day, who lived in Pickett, Texas. Day recorded six sides for Columbia with strong links to Dallas, as in 'Elm Street Blues': "Ellum Street's paved in brass, Main Street's paved in gold".

Next to record was William (Willie) Tyson. Born on 15th September, 1908, he recorded two unissued piano solos, 'Roberta Blues' and 'Missouri Blues' on 5th December for Columbia. One day later, he accompanied Hattie Hudson on her classic sides 'Black Hand Blues' and 'Doggone My Good Luck Soul'. Hattie Hudson is believed to be Hattie Burleson (born 27th July 1897 in Bastrop County, died 13th November, 1953 in Houston) who recorded the Texas classic 'Jim Nappy' in 1928. Tyson, who also accompanied Gertrude Perkins, Billiken Johnson and Lillian Glinn (1902 to 1970s) on record died on 30th September, 1956 in Corpus Christi.

K.D. Johnson became famous for accompanying two of the best female blues singers, Bessie Tucker (born 1907, died of TB in Dallas on 6th January, 1933) and Ida Mae Mack (born 28th August, 1902 in Sunset, Louisiana, died 3rd October, 1951 in Houston from uraemia and diabetes), K.D. Johnson, born on 8th January, 1900 (or January 1899 as the 1900 census says), accompanied Tucker and Mack on their legendary session for Victor on 29th and 30th August, 1928 in Memphis. Johnson was remembered by Alex Moore as '49'. Mack didn't only credit



Texas Bill Day. Label shot courtesy Michael Hortig.



Bessie Tucker, courtesy Michael Hortig.



Label shots: Paul Swinton.

Johnson as 'Mr. 49' during his solo passages, but also named a song after him. Johnson himself recorded two unissued solos on the 30th August, 1928, 'Levee Camp' and 'Days Of 49', which suggests that Johnson was a tent show pianist, because tent shows were

known as 'forty-nine shows'. He accompanied Tucker in 1929 together with Jesse Thomas for Victor in Dallas.

His piano style, consisting of hammered chords in the right, and a variety of bass figures from stride to early boogie forms, fitted perfectly to the irregular tempo and the moaning singing of Tucker and Mack. Speculations have been made if Johnson had been their pimp and why they didn't record again? Maybe the clue is Johnson's death some three months after the last session on 30th May, 1930 in Waco, due to TB, and the death of Tucker only three years later, facts, which were not known until now.

Another regional piano style was developed around Shreveport. Dave Alexander, who recorded under the name of 'Black Ivory King' in 1937 for Decca, and Dusky Dailey, who had two recording sessions in 1937 and 1939 for Vocalion, are generally known for recording a railroad piece 'The Flying Crow', which originated around Shreveport (guitarist Oscar Woods, also from Shreveport recorded this tune). It seems that Dailey was more a band pianist, not only for his later records with his band, but two of his four issued solo sides are pop numbers. Alexander fitted his nickname well, because three of his four recordings are played in the keys of A, Eb and Ab. He also reworked the Walter Roland classic 'Red Cross Store' with his own 'WPA Blues'. Virtually nothing about these two outstanding artists has been found.

The same goes for Big Boy Knox, who recorded four sides for Bluebird on 2nd March, 1937 in San Antonio. Some lines in 'Texas Blues' say that he was born in Louisiana and now is going to make Texas his home.

Frank Tannehill, born on 17th July, 1906 in Austin, first recorded in 1932 in Dallas as accompanist for Pere (Perry) Dickson. Under his own name, he recorded in 1937 for Vocalion in Chicago, 1938 for Bluebird in San Antonio and 1941 in Dallas. Over this period Tannehill changed his style from a heavy stride influenced, to a mellow, slow and sophisticated one. During his last session he also recorded a pop tune, 'Lillie Mae' that may indicate that he had changed from the barrelhouse circuit to a socially better audience. He died in Dallas on 27th April, 1943.

However the most powerful group of pianists working all around Texas but playing in a similar, technically outstanding style was the so-called 'Santa Fe Group'. Pianists of that loose group came from Galveston, Houston, Richmond, Sugarland, and even up from the Piney Woods. When this group started to develop their style is not known, but Robert Shaw, who survived into the 1960s, was still able to play that complicated and complex style and dated it around 1920. He describes it: "It's very peculiar and takes a lot of practice".

One bass figure, originated by a man with a lame hand, was to chop the keys with the edge of the left hand. They could even manage to play rag, blues and boogie basses, and, unlike other blues pianists of that time, they used to play in nearly all keys of the piano. Although some of the most famous pianists of that group were recorded, a legion of others remained only in the memories of Shaw: "Jack Coleman, he was bad, drank all night and we've got another boy Lester (Rusty) Johnson, he was kind of short. Or take Peg Leg Will, he was six feet tall and weighed

around 200 pounds. He wouldn't play nothing until he got drunk. He loved to shoot dice. He was about forty years old when I met him, me being around nineteen or twenty years old."

They had a lot of peculiar tunes like 'The Cows', 'Jim Nappy', 'Hattie Green', 'Black Girl', 'Put Me In The Alley', but the most famous piece was a dance number, called 'The Ma Grinder': "Whenever a new man would come looking for work, the bar keeper would tell him, let me hear you knock out the 'Ma Grinder'. Shaw in an interview with the author tells the story of that piece: "Three, four of us originated the 'grinder'; we kept messing with it until we'd got it together. Shine played it in F, Lester Johnson in B-flat, Jack Coleman in C and I in G". All members of the 'Santa Fe Group', who recorded did their own version of that classic title. And in the post-war years, the 'Grinder' could be heard in 'Big Three Boogie Woogie', and in a rehearsal for a session with Atlantic by Ray Charles.

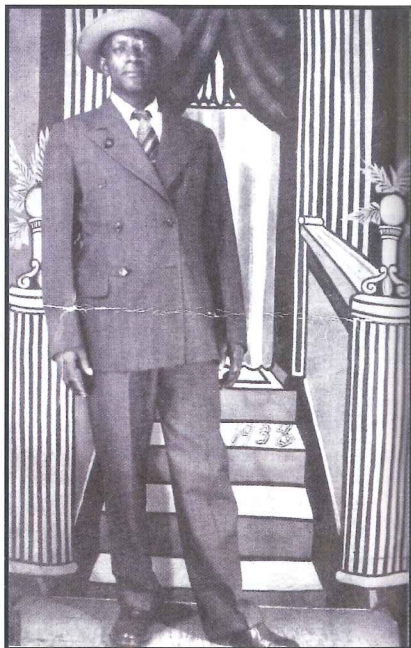
The first of that group to be recorded was Bernice Edwards. Born around 1908 in Houston, she was associated with the famous Thomas Family, but when they left Texas, she stayed on in Houston. She had a beautiful deep, lowdown voice and her piano playing was right in the 'Santa Fe' tradition. In February 1928, together with Blind Lemon Jefferson, she went up to Chicago to cut six titles for Paramount. In November the same year, now in the company of Ramblin' Thomas, she cut six more titles for Paramount.

Her last recordings were made on 20th April, 1935 for Vocalion, together with Howling Smith (J.T. 'Funny Paper' Smith) and Black Boy Shine. With the latter she made two piano/vocal duets and two piano duets with 'Hot Mattress Stomp', being an exuberant version of the 'Grinder'. The duets with Shine indicate that both must have worked some time together. Soon afterwards, she is said to have joined church and drifted into obscurity. The last known facts are that she was married in 1968, and died (as Bernice Chatman) soon afterwards in Houston on 26th. February, 1969.

Black Boy Shine, whose real name was Harold Holiday was born on 12th September, 1908. It's said that his mother was a prostitute and that he was born in a sporting house. His nickname is declared by himself in his 'Black Shine Blues': 'tell me why, they all like to call me Shine, because I drive six mules, Lord, and I takes my time.'

Six feet tall, weighing 150 pounds and having slick hair, he's reported to have been a gambler and a womaniser. He had a mellow mid-tempered style and with a slightly world-weary voice, he must have impressed the Vocalion people as they took him back into the studio on 20th November, 1936 after his first session in 1935 had been unissued.

Maybe they saw a replacement for Leroy Carr as Carr had died in 1935. He was remembered to be the best player of the group, which isn't really audible on his recorded output. The only clue to that can be found in the recently issued test recordings, on those he played in a more aggressive style and always played a solo chorus, which can't be found on his other issued records. He travelled a lot which is evident in his songs like 'Sugarland Blues' (reported to have been his base), 'Mud Alley Blues' (Richmond), 'Dog House Blues' (West Dallas), 'Dallas Woman Blues' or 'West Columbia Woman'. He even is remembered by barrelhouse player



Alex Moore, circa 1930s. From the B&R Archives.

Pigmeat Jarrett, who met him in Cincinnati in the 1930s.

After his last session in Dallas on 14th June, 1937, he dropped out of sight, only seen by Buster Pickens in 1948, health wrecked by TB. Harold Holiday died on 28th March, 1952 due to TB in Sugar Land, and was buried in Stafford, Texas.

Next to record was Conish 'Pinetop' Burks. Born on 7th August, 1907, it was said that he was raised near Richmond. He was remembered by Shaw: "Connie Burks, a dark fellow, about my size, maybe a little thicker than me. When I met him, he couldn't play, so I showed him some. Three years later, when I was in Richmond again, he played better than me". His recorded output of six titles, made for Vocalion on 25th October, 1937 in San Antonio, show him as a pianist with an incredible technique and melodic feeling. His 'Mountain Jack' is his version of the 'Grinder', his 'Fannie Mae' is the classic 'Hattie Green', and with 'Jack Of All Trades Blues', he recorded another Texas-classic. 'Shake The Shack' is a version of 'Pinetops Boogie Woogie', which is played both with boogie and Texas bass figures. He also dropped out of sight in the late 1930s, and he died on 11th January, 1947 in Corpus Christi.

Sharing the same session date was Leon Calhoun, who recorded under the name Son Becky. Born Leon Hathaway Calhoun on 13th October, 1910 in Wharton, Texas, it's said, that he was raised near Wharton by a relative with the name Becky, which led to his nickname, Son Becky. Medium in stature, stockily built, he is remembered playing along the Piney Woods border with Louisiana. An unknown guitarist and a washboard player accompanied him on his six titles, and this trio brought in the flavour of the music performed in the barrelhouses. Although not remembered by Robert Shaw, Becky made with his 'Mistreated Washboard Blues' his own version of the Santa Fe classic, the 'Ma Grinder'. Pickens remembered him dying in the early 1940s, which is proved by his death certificate. Son Becky died on 9th December, 1942 in Houston, due to 'acute dilatation of stomach'.



Labels shots courtesy Paul Swinton and Michael Hortig.

On 3rd April, 1934, the singer Joe Pullum from Houston recorded 'Black Gal, What Makes Your Head So Hard', which became a nationwide blues hit, recorded by others like Leroy Carr, Mary Johnson, and Jimmy Gordon. This number was a trademark of the 'Santa Fe Group', and the reason that these musicians have never been lost in the obscurity of blues history.

On this and two other record sessions, pianist Rob Cooper accompanied Pullum. His style had many links to stride/ragtime piano; his use of 'tens' in the left hand shows him as a very accomplished piano player. Shaw: "Robert Cooper was a youngster, the man who made 'Black Girl' with Pullum. We called him 'Perdue' ('Parduke'). He stayed in the Third Ward, Pullum in the Fourth Ward. He used to play with a band for a while, but when they split, he went up north to Chicago, and I've never seen him again". He recorded two versions of 'West Dallas Drag' under his own name, being his version of the 'Ma Grinder'. He did two more solo pieces, with Joe Pullum speech only: 'McKinney Street Stomp' and 'Blues With Class'. His last recording date with Pullum, who normally was accompanied by a pianist named Preston Chase, was on 25th February, 1936, and together with Chester Boone on trumpet and Melvin Martin on guitar, they recorded another Texas classic 'Hattie Green'.

Guido van Rijn found an advert in the *Chicago Defender* of the 16th March, 1946 about a Marvin Cates and his Earls of Rhythm, featuring a Robert Cooper (piano, vocals), but this is unconfirmed as the Texas man. Nothing else could be found on Rob Cooper.

Also only a few facts are known about the last musician of the 'Santa Fe Group', Andy Boy. It has been suggested, that boy was his real surname, but no evidence of an Andy/Anthony/Andrew Boy have been found. Shaw remembers him as: "He was a little fellow, just a little older than me. He was the top kicker of Galveston". Only a few clues in his recordings seem to have biographical character: 'I have been born on Church Street'. Of all in the group, he was really the top player. Ragtime, blues and jazz elements in the left hand were combined with runs or incredible chord clusters in the right hand. His 'House Raid Blues', recorded on 24th February, 1937 in San Antonio has poem-structure, which was never used before or later. Andy Boy sings about an evening in Charlie Shiro's club in Galveston, where Andy Boy: 'Now it was four day in the morning when the shack's got raided . . .' and: 'I'm playing the blues, down at the pool, just whippin that ivory board, just like a fool, then my hands got sore, somebody say, the law is at the door, so Andy Boy let go', and: 'I left so keen, I left, like a submarine. Couldn't hardly be seen . . .'

He also accompanied Joe Pullum on eleven titles on 13th August, 1935, although it is not remembered that he ever played with Pullum. He also accompanied a tough voiced singer from the waterfront, Walter 'Cowboy' Washington on four sides, recorded on 24th February, 1937. Rumours said that he left Texas for Kansas City in the mid 1950s, but no trace of him could be found. In his 'Church Street Blues', he only wanted to go: 'to that good old seaport town, where we all had fun and stomped the grinder down'!

In Part Two Michael Hortig discusses the Post War Texas Piano Blues.

STOMP THE GRINDER DOWN

TEXAS BLUES PIANO
PART TWO
BY MICHAEL HORTIG



Robert Shaw, at his home in Austin, Texas, October, 1981. Photo: Michael Hortig.

In the 1940s the migration movement also hit Texas. In 1930, there were only about 80,000 blacks in California. During the next decade, the number only increased by a half. But by 1950 the black population had risen to more than half a million. They all went west for new jobs in the shipbuilding and defence industries, and the oil refineries along the Californian coast. With them, many Texas born musicians left for the West Coast. T-Bone Walker was one of the first in 1935 and pianists like Amos Milburn, Floyd Dixon and Mercy Dee Walton made their way to the West Coast. But blues had changed from the country sound of a solo performer to the much more urban sound of electrified blues bands. The jukebox was invented and it pushed the piano out of the barrelhouses and juke joints. This killed the blues pianist's main source of employment; the older ones couldn't change their styles and most of them dropped out of sight.

The first pianist, who recorded post war, was Wilson 'Thunder' Smith. He was born on 11th November, 1914 in Wharton, Texas. Nothing about his early years is known, but he must have spent some time with the 'Santa Fe

Group', as his only recorded solo-piece 'Santa Fe Blues', recorded in 1949 indicates his roots in the early styles of the Group.

Anne Cullum, who acted as talent scout for the West Coast based Aladdin label (she had found Amos Milburn in 1946 and Aladdin asked her to look around Houston for more talent), found him along with Sam Hopkins, Luther Stoneham and Texas Alexander. Texas Alexander's appearance frightened her, and knowing that he had just been released from prison, she only took Hopkins and Smith to Los Angeles in November 1946, there they each recorded four titles. 'I'm away to the west coast, tryin to do the best I can' ('West Coast Blues').

In an interview in 1967 she remembered why both got their nicknames: "Wilson made thunder on the piano, Sam was lightnin' on the guitar". Although Hopkins later told several other versions, this seems the right one. Hopkins' records sold very well and both stayed for a while in California, playing around Los Angeles and Oakland.

In 1948 Smith was back in Houston and teamed up with guitarist Luther Stoneham, with whom he recorded several sides for Down Town and Gold Star. He also accompanied Sunny James and Honeyboy Edwards (under the pseudonym of 'Mr. Honey') during that time. He didn't record again because his fondness for heavy drinking made him too big a risk for the record companies. He drifted into obscurity, playing at small bars in and around Houston. Smith was a very talented singer and piano player, mastering not only the old blues

styles but also the newer boogie influenced urban piano-styles. On 20th August, 1963, Wilson Smith was brutally murdered in front of his home in Houston.

Bill Quinn, owner of the Houston based Gold Star label, recorded two piano players: Leroy Ervin in 1947 and Lee Hunter in 1948. Stylistically, they tended to the older 'Santa Fe Group', as Hunter from Wiergate, Texas and older brother of r&b star Ivory Joe Hunter indicates in his 'Back To Santa Fe': "I'm going back to the Santa Fe, where I'm better known".

Another pianist from the older generation, Sonny Boy Davis recorded two titles for the Talent Label in 1949, and accompanied



Label shot: Michael Hortig



Buster Pickens. From the B&R Archives.

guitarist Rattlesnake Cooper on two more. This was the end of the first generation of Texas blues pianists recording in the 78-rpm era.

The best-known Texas pianist is Whistlin' Alex Moore from Dallas. Born as Alexander Hermann Moore on 22nd November, 1899, he spent all of his life in Dallas. His recording career spans from 1929 until 1988, recording in every decade, except the 1970s. He developed his style from the slow and mellow one of the 1920s up to an improvised style, where he mixed up all the elements of his musical life, barrelhouse, blues, ragtime, sometimes played at an incredibly fast speed, accompanied by his whistling and newly formed verses.

When I visited him in 1981 he told me: "I don't really know what I'm going to play now, until I get started". When he started playing in his early teens there "were more piano-players in North Dallas than anywhere in the United States". He had an incredible memory of stories, places and piano

players of that time like Joe Curtis, Frankie Allen, Buster or Fred Curtis. He worked in all the notorious parts of town like Deep Ellum, Froggy Bottom or Central Tracks. He continued to record in 1937 for Decca, 1947 for Private and 1951 for the RPM label. During that time and up to 1964, when he retired, he always supported himself with 'non piano-playing' jobs like junk man or hotel janitor.

In 1960 he was rediscovered by Chris Strachwitz, who recorded him for his Arhoolie label. He was invited to join the American Folk Blues Festival Tour in 1969, where Moore was very amused to be sharing a room with

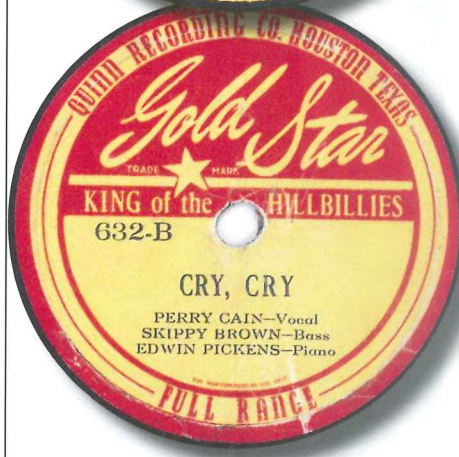
a gravedigger (John Jackson). This tour was a big success for Moore, travelling around Europe, handled by everyone with care and love. In Stuttgart, Germany, he recorded again for Arhoolie. In his later years he enjoyed his fame, played wherever he was invited and cut his last recordings in 1988. Alex Moore died on 20th January, 1989.

Robert 'Fud' Shaw was born on 9th August, 1908 in Stafford, Texas. In his youth he worked on his father's cattle farm, where he learned butchering and barbecuing, something that became important in later life. In his mid teens, he started playing around with the 'Santa Fe Group', most influenced by Black Boy Shine: "We were very close, 'bout the same age. He was a hard drinker and gambler. Slept all day, played, drank and gambled all night". He followed their routes all over Texas from Sugarland to Richmond, from Galveston to Houston's fourth Ward. In 1932 he had a playing job in the 'Black Orange Café' in Kansas City and one year later a radio programme over KFXR in Oklahoma City. But after ten years of piano playing for a living, and a brush with the law, Shaw decided to settle back in Austin. There he started with a small ice house, later he opened a small grocery store, with a piano in the backroom to entertain the customers. He started a barbecue trade, which made him famous all over Austin. In the 1950s he opened a big supermarket, but there was no more place for a piano, and it moved into his house, from now on Shaw only played for pleasure.

In 1962, he was named 'Texas outstanding negro businessman'. Texas Blues researcher Mack McCormick discovered him and recorded him on 8th March, 1963 and the record was released first on the Almanac, later on the Arhoolie Label. In 1965 Shaw suffered



Grey Ghost from the B&R Archives.



Label shot: Michael Hortig



Top: Alex Moore at his home in Dallas, October, 1981. Below: Lavada Durst (aka Dr. Hepcat) at Robert Shaw's home, October 1981. Photos: Michael Hortig. Bottom: Robert Shaw in Berlin, 1974. Photo: Konrad Nowakowski.



a heart attack, but he continued working at his store and performing regularly. In October 1974 he was booked as part of the 'From Rag To Boogie' tour with Little Brother Montgomery, Sunnyland Slim, Willie Mabon and Robert Lockwood, which brought him to Rotterdam, Zurich and Berlin. From 1976 he became a favourite act at the annual Kerrville Folk Festival. He occasionally appeared on radio KUT-FM (1976 and 1984) and in later years teamed up with his prodigy, pianist Lavada Durst (aka Dr. Hep Cat). Robert Shaw died in Austin on 18th May, 1985.

While I was visiting Robert Shaw's house, his old friend Lavada Durst came in to sign a concert contract. Also a life-long resident of Austin, Durst was born on 9th January, 1913 and learned piano from people like Boot Walden, Baby Dotson, Mack Moore and Robert Shaw, who was his greatest influence. Despite his piano playing, Durst was more known as a hip talker

and named 'Dr. Hepcat'. In the 1940s he announced Negro baseball games with this special jive talk. On one of those occasions he was heard by John Connally, who worked with Austin's KVET radio station. He hired Durst as the first black disc jockey, a job, which Durst held for the next fifteen years. In 1949 he cut four sides for Uptown and two for Peacock, including the classic 'Hattie Green'. After his retirement as a disc jockey, he became pastor for the Olivet Baptist Church in Austin. He stopped playing in clubs, but kept on performing with his old friend Robert Shaw at folk festivals or college concerts. In 1988, together with Austin pianists T. Williams and Erbie Bowser, he recorded an LP for Catfish records, called 'Texas Piano Professors'. Lavada Durst died on 31st October, 1995.

Also resident in Austin was Roosevelt Williams, better known as 'Grey Ghost'. He was born on 7th December, 1903 in Bastrop from where he moved as a teenager to Waco, Texas. After the death of his father he was raised by his mother and his stepfather. By the early 1920s he was an accomplished pianist, working round the Waco area with his friend, Baby Van.

He played throughout Texas in the 1930s. He got his nickname 'Grey Ghost' for "appearing out of nowhere, singing and playing all night, then vanishing into the dawn, just after he'd finished his last song". In the late 1940s he settled in Austin, working as a bus driver for the Austin Independent School District, a job, he held until his retirement in 1965.

In 1940 folklorist William A. Owen discovered him playing at a skating ring in Navasota, Texas. Owen recorded four titles by Williams, including one with singer 'Popeye' Johnson. Impressed by 'Ghost', Owen recorded him again a year later in Smithville, Texas, including 'Hitler Blues', which was not only mentioned in a *Time Magazine* article, but was also played on a BBC radio broadcast. Although he was rediscovered by Mack McCormick in the late 1950s his playing was tainted by pop songs. He made his next recordings in 1965/1966 for Tary Owens, which were issued in 1987 on the Catfish label.

During that time, the 'Grey Ghost' vanished again, before he was rediscovered by Owens in 1986. From then on, he appeared at many festivals, local gigs and recorded sporadically. His style as in his own words is: "You just can't play only blues, and make it as a musician". That means in the barrelhouse tradition, that a piano-player had to play blues, pop and jazz tunes as well. During his last years he travelled to festivals in New York, New Orleans and Chicago. His last public appearance was on his 92nd birthday at the 'Continental Club' in Austin. The 'Grey Ghost' died on 17th July, 1996.

Of all the five Texas pianists who survived the rough times of the barrelhouse circuit, Edwin Buster Pickens is the tragic one. Never able to support himself apart from piano playing, he could be found on the streets of Houston in the 1960s looking for a job as a piano player.

Born Edwin Godwin Pickens on 6th March, 1916 in Hamstead, Texas, he was a kid, travelling along with the cream of Texas pianists like Black Boy Shine, Son Becky or Pinetop Burks. In his autobiographical 'Santa Fe Train' he describes riding the blinds, meeting other pianists, persuading the brakeman to let him

ride the train, and taking over the job of a worn-out pianist named Foster in a lumber camp. He went on to record as accompanist to Bill Hayes, Goree Carter and Perry Cain at the beginning of the 1950s. He became famous when he played piano on Texas Alexander's last session on 16th April, 1950, accompanying the old singer with guitarist Leon Benton on his last two chaotic sides as 'Benton's Busy Bees'.

When discovered in the early 1960s, Pickens lived the life of a drifter in the black community in Houston, shooting dice, playing pool or cards and looking for the rare opportunities to get a piano playing job. He recorded a long session for McCormick and a part of that was issued on the Heritage Label, later on Flyright. But many interesting tunes like 'The Ma Grinder Pt. II', 'The Cows' or even the classic 'Stack 'O Lee' remain unissued. His last years were spent playing with Lightnin' Hopkins or Hop Wilson at local gigs, and he appeared in a recently issued DVD, made by German researcher Dietrich Wawzyn and Chris Strachwitz.

Edwin 'Buster' Pickens who tried all of his life to avoid playing in overheated barrelhouses and wore a thick coat to protect against the chilly air when jumping trains, was murdered by a cousin in a quarrel over some coins in a pool game in an unnamed brothel in Houston on 24th November, 1964, never getting his chance to become better known to a wider blues audience.

This is the end of the history of 'Texas Blues Piano'. Although under recorded in the 1920s and 1930s, this particular piano style existed right up into the late 1980s.

Of most of the well known blues pianists from Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, and Birmingham who had recorded extensively throughout the 1920s and 1930s, few survived through to the 1960s. Some were rediscovered and recorded again, although few were able to recapture their original skills - unlike pianists Robert Shaw, Alex Moore or the Grey Ghost who were around when the 'Grinder' was played all over Texas and Alex Moore was able to sing: 'ol' Alex at the planner, knock them out in a boogie manner'.

Bibliography:

Paul Oliver: 'Story Of The Blues';
'Conversation With The Blues'

Mike Leadbitter: 'Nothing But The Blues'

Alan Govenar: 'Meeting The Blues'

Living Blues No. 130: Obituary of Grey Ghost

Cover Notes: Magpie 4404, 4408, 4411; Muscadine 104; Agram 2009; Flyright 536; Catfish 1001, 1002; Arhoolie R2006, AR 19004

Interviews by the author: Alex Moore, Robert Shaw, Lavada Durst, in October 1981 in Austin and Dallas.

Thanks to: Bob Eagle, for checking the death certificates with the US census, Konrad Nowakowski and Hans Maitner for providing help and material from their collections and Paul Swinton for his help, the label scans and the scan of the Bessie Tucker flyer (in part one).

Summary of Houston Police Department Reports

STATE OF TEXAS		101-1-3 101-1-3		CERTIFICATE OF DEATH		50		70914	
1. PLACE OF BIRTH		a. COUNTY Harris		b. CITY OR TOWN (if outside city limits, give precinct no.) Houston		c. LENGTH OF STAY 20 Yrs.		d. USUAL RESIDENCE (where deceased lived, if institution residence before admission) Houston	
2. NAME OF (if not in hospital, give street address) 709 West Dallas Avenue		3. DATE OF BIRTH 11-24-64		4. STREET ADDRESS (if rural, give location) 911 Andrew St.		5. RESIDENCE (if outside city limits, give precinct no.)		6. RESIDENCE ON A FARM	
7. NAME OF DECEASED Edwin Goodwin Pickens		8. SEX Male		9. COLOR OF RACE Negro		10. DATE OF DEATH 11-24-64		11. AGE AT DEATH 48	
12. USUAL OCCUPATION (give kind of work done, if kind of business or industry) Pianist		13. FATHER'S NAME Ed Pickens		14. SOCIAL SECURITY NO. 48-05-1058		15. BIRTHPLACE (State or foreign country) Hempstead, Texas		16. CITIZEN OF WHAT COUNTRY U. S. A.	
17. MOTHER'S MARRIAGE NAME Bessie Gage		18. MOTHER'S MARRIAGE NAME Mrs Ethel Pickens		19. DATE OF DEATH 11-24-64		20. TIME OF DEATH 6:00 P.		21. PLACE OF DEATH (State or foreign country) Houston	
22. CAUSE OF DEATH (Enter only one cause per line for (a), (b) and (c))		23. IMMEDIATE CAUSE (a) Gunshot wound of the chest.		24. DUE TO (b) Shot.		25. DUE TO (c) Sustained during a brawl.		26. OTHER SIGNIFICANT CONDITIONS CONTRIBUTING TO DEATH BUT NOT RELATED TO THE TERMINAL DISEASE CONDITION GIVEN IN PART (a)	
27. ACCIDENT		28. SUICIDE		29. HOMICIDE		30. DISCRETE HOW INJURY OCCURRED (Enter nature of injury in Part I or Part II of form 10)		31. DATE OF DEATH 11-24-64	
32. TIME OF DEATH 6:00 P.		33. PLACE OF DEATH (State or foreign country) Houston		34. CITY, TOWN, OR LOCATION Houston		35. NAME OF CEMETERY OR CREMATORY Brenham Cemetery		36. FUNERAL DIRECTOR'S SIGNATURE Jackson Funeral Home	
37. BURIAL CEMETERY, REMOVAL (Specify) Removal		38. DATE 11-29-64		39. NAME OF CEMETERY OR CREMATORY Jackson Funeral Home		40. FUNERAL DIRECTOR'S SIGNATURE Jackson Funeral Home		41. DATE SIGNED 12-2-64	
42. REGISTRATION FILE NO. 6701		43. DATE REC'D BY LOCAL REGISTRAR DEC. 7, 1964		44. NAME OF LOCAL REGISTRAR		45. SIGNATURE		46. SIGNATURE	

STATE OF TEXAS		101-1-21 101-1-21		CERTIFICATE OF DEATH		50		50780	
1. PLACE OF BIRTH		a. COUNTY Harris		b. CITY OR TOWN (if outside city limits, give precinct no.) Houston		c. LENGTH OF STAY D. O. A.		d. USUAL RESIDENCE (where deceased lived, if institution residence before admission) Houston	
2. NAME OF (if not in hospital, give street address) Ben Taub General Hospital		3. DATE OF BIRTH 11-17-1914		4. STREET ADDRESS (if rural, give location) 730 E. 40th Street		5. RESIDENCE (if outside city limits, give precinct no.)		6. RESIDENCE ON A FARM	
7. NAME OF DECEASED Wilson		8. SEX Male		9. COLOR OF RACE Negro		10. DATE OF DEATH 11-20-1963		11. AGE AT DEATH 48	
12. USUAL OCCUPATION (give kind of work done, if kind of business or industry) Laborer		13. FATHER'S NAME Ed Smith		14. SOCIAL SECURITY NO. 48-05-1058		15. BIRTHPLACE (State or foreign country) Houston, Texas		16. CITIZEN OF WHAT COUNTRY U. S. A.	
17. MOTHER'S MARRIAGE NAME Mary (Mont. Brown Maiden)		18. MOTHER'S MARRIAGE NAME Mary (Mont. Brown Maiden)		19. DATE OF DEATH 11-20-1963		20. TIME OF DEATH 10:30 P.		21. PLACE OF DEATH (State or foreign country) Houston	
22. CAUSE OF DEATH (Enter only one cause per line for (a), (b) and (c))		23. IMMEDIATE CAUSE (a) Multiple cuts, blunt lacerations.		24. DUE TO (b) Fractures of the face and broken neck.		25. DUE TO (c) Sustained during a brawl.		26. OTHER SIGNIFICANT CONDITIONS CONTRIBUTING TO DEATH BUT NOT RELATED TO THE TERMINAL DISEASE CONDITION GIVEN IN PART (a)	
27. ACCIDENT		28. SUICIDE		29. HOMICIDE		30. DISCRETE HOW INJURY OCCURRED (Enter nature of injury in Part I or Part II of form 10)		31. DATE OF DEATH 11-20-1963	
32. TIME OF DEATH 10:30 P.		33. PLACE OF DEATH (State or foreign country) Houston		34. CITY, TOWN, OR LOCATION Houston		35. NAME OF CEMETERY OR CREMATORY Etnity Park		36. FUNERAL DIRECTOR'S SIGNATURE Community Chapel Funeral Home	
37. BURIAL CEMETERY, REMOVAL (Specify) Removal		38. DATE 11-24-1963		39. NAME OF CEMETERY OR CREMATORY Community Chapel Funeral Home		40. FUNERAL DIRECTOR'S SIGNATURE Community Chapel Funeral Home		41. DATE SIGNED 9-9-63	
42. REGISTRATION FILE NO. 6701		43. DATE REC'D BY LOCAL REGISTRAR SEP. 16, 1963		44. NAME OF LOCAL REGISTRAR		45. SIGNATURE		46. SIGNATURE	

Murder Case S-76456 : Buster Pickens

Edwin Goodwin 'Buster' Pickens died of a gunshot wound of the neck centered at approximately the Adams Apple, at approximately 6:00 pm., inside the N. R. Lounge located at 709 West Dallas Avenue near Heiner Street. Willie James Bates, age 46, shot his cousin Pickens at a table with a hand gun while drinking and arguing about 'kinfolks' business. Willie James Bates surrendered at 10:45pm, claiming the shooting was an accident. He was charged in Judge Duggans Criminal District Court with murder and carrying a pistol and was given five years. Buster Pickens was buried on 29th November in Brenham Cemetery, Hempstead.

Murder Case R-71383 : Thunder Smith

Wilson 'Thunder' Smith died on arrival at the Ben Taub General Hospital at 10:30pm, of multiple cuts, blunt laceration and fractures of the face; comminuted, depressed fractures of nose and maxilla; and a broken neck. This was all sustained during a brawl at a boarding house at 404 Meadow Street near Cline Street. Edward Roy 'Little Edd' Alexander, age thirty, hit Wilson with a board, due to an argument of being accused of taking of money out of Wilson's pants and that Wilson had tried to cut his throat but only cut him on the inside of his right leg. Shortly before his argument with Wilson, Little Edd had also been accused of taking money (eighty cents) from another tenant (Mr. Posey). While being treated at the same hospital, Mr. Alexander was arrested and on 21st August, was charged with murder at Judge Treadway's Court. Thunder Smith was buried on 24th August in Etnity Park, Houston.

Thanks to Eric LeBlanc