15. Boogie Woogie Piano

In a period when jazz meant rhythm and the music was played mostly for dancing, solo pianists were constantly searching for ways to attract attention. Those with less musical skill than Art Tatum — and that includes almost everybody who ever played the piano — had trouble trying to compete with the big bands to win the approval of the dance-crazy public.

Some discovered they could please dancers with a fast-paced blues style. They added repeated eighth notes in the bass line rather than quarter notes and repeated figures, often interspersed with single-note runs, with the right hand. The style came to be known as “boogie woogie.” Two of its most important boogie pianists had strong ties to Cleveland.

Cow Cow Davenport

One of the earliest blues piano players, Cow Cow Davenport, moved to Cleveland in 1930 and spent the last 25 years of his life there after playing in New Orleans’ historic Storyville district, performing with Bessie Smith, and composing a number of songs, including some that became boogie woogie classics.

Charles Davenport was born in Anniston, Alabama in 1894, one of eight children of a minister and a church organist. He taught himself to play the organ and began taking piano lessons at the age of 12. His religious parents objected to his playing blues and ragtime. “I showed off (my singer) Dora (Carr) too much and somebody took her away from me.” He said he “showed off (his singer) Dora (Carr) too much and somebody took her away from me.”

By 1927, Davenport found another musical partner named Ivy Smith. They spent a great deal of time performing in Chicago.

One night in the late 1920s in Pittsburgh, Davenport said he met a pianist named Pinetop Smith, who, in Davenport’s words, “was trying to copy my piano style.” Smith was also calling his piano music “boogie woogie,” but, according to Davenport, “Smith really didn’t know what he was playing.” Ironically, in the mid-1930s, Smith’s “Pinetop’s Boogie” became the first widely-recognized example of the boogie woogie style. Smith’s song was recorded by Bing Crosby and it triggered national interest in the style. The Tommy Dorsey big band made a record of “Boogie Woogie” and it sold more than four million copies. It became the most popular of Dorsey’s many hit records.

While the music of his younger admirer was being played nationally, Davenport was having trouble making a living as an entertainer. In 1930 (at the age of 36), he moved to Cleveland where his sister lived and opened a record shop. He continued to compose and tried to tour...
several more times, but his popularity was fading and he was forced to sell his tour bus. At one point, he opened a café in Cleveland.

In the 1940s, several of Davenport’s old songs were resurrected. In the midst of the boogie woogie boom, Ella Mae Morse, Ella Fitzgerald, and others made hit records of his best remembered song, “Cow Cow Boogie.”

After Davenport finally achieved some national attention, he was afflicted with a partial paralysis that all but deprived him of the use of his right hand. Unable to play, he went to New York City in 1942, and worked as a washroom attendant at the famous Onyx Club, a citadel of bebop, on 52nd Street.

After regaining the use of his hand, he played a number of local gigs in Cleveland and married a singer named Peggy Taylor who also happened to be a snake charmer. Newspaperman Julian Krawcheck, who had formed a jazz organization called the Hot Club of Cleveland, invited Davenport to play at some of the club’s sessions at the Cabin Club at East 105th and Euclid. “He must have been in his late 50s,” recalled Krawcheck, “but he looked to be in his 60s.”

“One night, he brought his wife to sing and she brought a snake with her! Oh, my God,” recalled Krawcheck, “I was scared to death! I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to stop the music and tell the people to run like hell!” Krawcheck said Davenport’s wife was never invited back.

In the early 1950s, Davenport and his wife became involved in theatrical productions at Cleveland’s Karamu House.

Davenport died of hardening of the arteries in 1955 at the age of 61 at his home on East 92nd Street in Cleveland. He was buried in Cleveland’s Evergreen Cemetery.

Davenport never won the wide recognition he probably deserved as an early pioneer of jazz piano, a developer of the boogie boogie style, and as the composer of several classic jazz songs.

**Freddie Slack**

Probably the most popular boogie woogie piano player of the 1930s and ‘40s, Freddie Slack, a native of La Crosse, Wisconsin, came to Cleveland in 1935 to play with the Ben Pollack Orchestra at the Mayfair Casino, a plush nightclub in the Ohio Theatre Building on Euclid Avenue. A year later, Slack left the Pollack band and joined Jimmy Dorsey’s Orchestra which included Cleveland trumpeter George Thow and drummer Ray McKinley.

In 1939, McKinley teamed up with trombonist Will Bradley to form a new big band and hired Slack to play piano and arrange. With so many big bands playing at the time, success for the new Will Bradley-Ray McKinley band depended on a distinctive sound. The Bob Crosby Orchestra had become popular by playing big band arrangements of dixieland jazz. McKinley and Slack had heard Cow Cow Davenport, Meade Lux Lewis, Albert Ammons and others playing boogie woogie with small groups and wondered how a big band would sound playing boogie woogie jazz. They decided to experiment with the eight-to-the-bar form.

McKinley remembered, “We were playing one of those songs one night at the Famous Door and two songwriters were there. There was a part where I had a drum break, and for some reason or other, instead of playing the break, I sang out,

*Oh, beat me, daddy, eight to the bar!*

After the set, McKinley said one of the songwriters “called me over to the table and asked if they could write a song using the vocal break.”

“Beat Me, Daddy, Eight to the Bar,” composed by Don Raye and Hughie Prince and played by the Will Bradley Orchestra with drummer Ray McKinley and pianist Slack became a big national hit. The band quickly made a series of other popular big band boogie woogie records including “Fry Me, Cookie, With a Can of Lard,” “Scrub Me, Mama, With a Boogie Beat,” and “Bounce Me, Brother, With a Solid Four.” Slack became the national personification of the boogie woogie piano style.

Two years later (in 1941), Slack formed his own band, but he had little success until he hired a singer he had met with the Jimmy Dorsey Orchestra. Ella Mae Morse’s recordings with Slack’s band of Davenport’s “Cow Cow Boogie” and “Blacksmith Blues” helped put the new Capitol Record Company in the black.

Slack appeared in two Hollywood movies but gave up the band business in the early 1950s.

In August of 1965, at the age of 55, Slack was found dead in his Hollywood apartment of undetermined causes. It was 30 years after he had come to Cleveland to play at the Mayfair Casino and 25 years after he had become the most popular boogie woogie piano player in the country.