

How Boogie Woogie Originated in the Marshall Area

By Jack Canson

Based on the research of John Tennison, MD



In the 1930s, music historians compiled oral histories and began to determine where and when that distinctive, popular and most influential of musical innovations -- Boogie Woogie piano -- had its origins.

These oral histories produced a broad consensus: Boogie Woogie piano was first played by African-Americans in Texas in the early 1870s. The music emerged in the Piney Woods of northeast Texas in close proximity to railroad building and the logging camps, where work crews composed of former slaves felled the trees, sawed logs, and made crossties for the rail beds. In or nearby every logging camp was a barrel house.

In the 1870s, a barrel house was just that -- a shack where barrels were assembled or stored. Often, the camp overseers would keep a piano in the barrel house to keep the laborers from drifting away at night in search of diversion elsewhere. It was in these barrel houses that the African-American piano players first began to play the piano "like a drum" and make a piano "sound like a train."

Prior to the June 19, 1865 Emancipation Order freeing all slaves in Texas, few Negroes in northeast Texas or anywhere in the South had more than limited access to a piano. But in the early 1870s, a musician with piano skills trying to entertain former slaves now working around the

railroad and in the logging camps was free to experiment and invent in the barrel house.

At the same time, the tranquility and silence of the rural Piney Woods was being broken by the chuffing, rattling, hammering, and syncopated rhythms of the construction and operation of the railroad. These new sounds and rhythms made their way into the music. For example, the 8-Beats-to-the-bar of classic Boogie Woogie is associated with 2 rotations of a steam engine driver wheel. Suddenly, an entirely new way of playing the piano was established, emulating the sounds of the railroad.

The historical record is clear that three important elements influenced the first Boogie Woogie style of playing when it emerged in the 1870s. Research by Dr. John Tennison has established that these necessary elements were only present in the Marshall, Texas area during this period. Those essential elements are (1) the Piney Woods of northeast Texas; (2) African Americans working in logging camps and railroad construction; and (3) the close proximity of a railroad "hub."



Marshall was by far the most influential and successful city in the Piney Woods, and Harrison County had the largest population of African Americans in the state of Texas for most of the latter half of the 19th Century. Marshall was also the only railroad hub in northeast Texas during this period.

The railroad did not *arrive* in Marshall, it *began* here. The first train and rails to reach Marshall were brought up the Red River by steamboat and barges to Swanson's Landing on Caddo Lake. Originally chartered as the Texas



Western Railroad in 1852, this line, which was one of the earliest in the state of Texas, connected Swanson's Landing to Jonesville and Marshall by 1858.

Railroad building in northeast Texas began in earnest after the Civil War. In 1872, Marshall became the headquarters of the Texas and Pacific Railroad, and its machine shops and rail yards were bustling by 1873. The only other railroad hub in Texas at that time was in Houston, which was outside of the Piney Woods and whose African American population was dwarfed by that of Harrison County.

The earliest Boogie Woogie musicians used the trains to travel between various logging camps within the Piney Woods. The only rail system in existence in the Piney Woods during the 1870s that could have served this role was the T&P, with its numerous tap lines and spurs connecting the logging camps. And Marshall was the hub of the T&P.

The earliest Boogie Woogie bass figures are named after stops on the T&P Railroad out of Marshall -- "the Tyler Tap", "the Big Sandy", "the Waskom", etc. And the most primitive of all the Boogie Woogie bass lines is known as "the Marshall".

Boogie Woogie was not a refinement of existing styles of music. It was instead a gradual development of an entirely new way of playing the piano -- stylistically different from Ragtime and Jazz. The elements that caused this evolution were only present in the Marshall, Texas, area at the time the music emerged. That is why Dr. Tennison and others proclaim that Marshall, Texas is indeed the Birthplace of Boogie Woogie.

for much more on the history, visit boogiewoogiemarshall.com