

BIG MACEO

The rare talent that Big Maceo brought to the RCA Victor studios in 1941 earned fame but little fortune in a career composed of ironies and culminating in tragedy. Tucked away in the near obscurity of Detroit's Black Bottom, his recording career started late and ended all too early for he was 36 years old when he made his first session and but 41 when a stroke effectively destroyed his piano playing career. And even those five years, when his piano art was at its peak of perfection, were interrupted by the Pettit recording ban which closed the studios for two years. But in just those three years allotted, Maceo committed to posterity 28 sides that must rank among the most powerful and beautiful of the decade.

His music and reputation are well enough known but the man himself was a mystery, cloaked in an anonymity reserved for the bluesmen of his generation. That he lived in Detroit was certain but confusion reigned even over his name and his background. The few clues provided on record are misleading. *My Home in Texas*, he sang at his very first session and later paid further homage to his adopted state with *Texas Stomp*. No one, not even his closest colleagues, saw reason to doubt it.

It's now over 20 years since Maceo died but the trail isn't quite cold yet, and talking with his widow Hattie in a Senior Citizens' project in Detroit or with his sole remaining brother the Reverend Roy Meriweather on the porch of his Dayton home brings closer into focus the features of a shadowy portrait.

Much remains to be told for Hattie's memory is failing while Roy, a Minister of the church since 1922, hardly moved in the same circles as his famous hard drinking 'baby' brother. But bits of the puzzle gradually fall into place as the Reverend Meriweather wracks his memory:

"We was raised on a farm my brother and I . . . in Coweta County between Newnan, Georgia and Atlanta . . . 39 miles west of Atlanta . . . and there we worked on the farm until he got—I'm talking about my baby brother now—he was fifteen years old when he went to Atlanta and there he would hang around the restaurants and where they play pianos at."

Their parents Christopher (Kit) and Ora Meriweather (Maceo always spelled the family name "Meriweather") were both born in Newnan as were their 11 children. Maceo, born Major Meriweather, March 31, 1905, was the youngest of the five boys if not of all the children and poorly apart from enjoying a little favoritism his childhood couldn't have been much different from any other young Negro born into a Southern farming family at the turn of the century. There were no musicians in the family at that time but there was a lot of singing.

"We were all singers, gifted to sing by my father. My daddy was always singing when he came home from work. When he came home from the fields he get his book out his singing book—and he say, 'Come on boy, come and help me out.'"

When they moved from the farm, about 1920, Kit got a job with the Laurel National Bank and the family settled at 52 Ham Street in College Park, 9 miles out of Atlanta. There Major first came into contact with the piano by hanging around the joints along Harvard Avenue:

"He couldn't play a piano in the country but he started playing in College Park, the suburb of Atlanta. Maceo didn't start in church though he was a church member. He went to church but he didn't start playing piano in the church or for the church—he started in a 'restaurant' or some kind of joint they called it you know."

The 'restaurant', the Rev. Meriweather's euphemism for the kind of joint that would employ a piano player, is probably the house that Hattie remembered Maceo telling her about when she recalled:

"He started playing just in somebody's house, started playing for a lady named Roxy and he'd work for her so she'd let him play 'y' know."

Roy was adamant that nobody 'taught' Maceo, meaning formal musical lessons, but he must have picked up some of his technique from his unknown contemporaries:

"He couldn't play so good but he learnt by the other boys playing. He played by ear. I know he trained himself 'cause 'y' know by practising with other people. He just kept catching music and kept playing it just about as good as anybody else. So he became famous by practising in that capacity. He went around these joints where pianos was sitting around and people liked to dance and, like to say, anybody start a little music they start to stomping and, 'Sing that thing, boy—Go ahead.' He was a good singer and when he hear a blues he start to sing it and he go to playing it—he played while he sing. Maceo. And that he'd call attention to the group and they'd have him to come back every night and play some more. 'Cause they didn't have many famous around College Park."

By this time two of the older children, Guy Lee and Odessa were already living in Detroit and Roy, who had married, was persuaded to follow with his family.

The next year, 1924, Major too made the trip North. The Meriweathers joined the rest of the early migrants to Detroit settling on the East Side. Roy lived at 1904 Antietam just across from the Grand Trunk Railroad tracks and Maceo roomed nearby. There he kept up his piano playing at house-parties:

"He went around and played for houses 'y' know where people sell whiskey and stuff like that."

And it was about this time that he got his recording name "Maceo," a curious corruption of Major. The addition of "Big" was easier to understand though:

"Major was six-foot-four I believe—looked like a big bear! He weighed about 256."

Roy didn't share the average church-members aversion to the Blues and with a piano in his home Maceo would play there freely; other times Roy saw him at clubs, name lost, forgotten, on Russell and Macomb Street. About 1926 Roy set off for Atlanta to bring the rest of the family back to Detroit after Kit Meriweather was knocked down by a truck and killed. Then soon after Roy and family took his mother to Dayton where another sister lived and lost touch with his younger brother.

The blues activity of Detroit in the '20s and '30s is largely undocumented—the joints are unknown and the artists forgotten. Only Chas Spand and Will Ezell saw the inside of a recording studio in the years before the Depression halted 'Race' recording and it was going to take Maceo a long time to get on record. Whether he had little interest in recording or just lacked the contacts is not known but he worked during the day and his playing was probably confined to the house-parties. One of the houses where he played was run by a lady, Russell Hattie Bell Spruel, who later became his wife. Hattie had a house and sold whiskey upstairs at 980 Alfred Street, between Harvard and Hastings:

"And that's where I met him. He used to come to my house all the time and I'd give him money and the rest used to give him whiskey. And I told him don't do no whiskey, don't play yourself cheap. Don't bring no whiskey or no wine 'cause you soon be a whiskey-head, wine-head and you won't have no place. He didn't know nothing about nothing and he'd have women just to go around with when I got him I put him in my records. When he was here I put him on records. When I married Maceo I was quite a kid, long before he was working on the WPA. He was the man that walked the track and when times was bad he was a handyman, when times was good he worked everywhere—always kept a job. He worked at Fords and he worked all over."

Hattie gives every indication of having been a good business-woman and it was at her urging that Maceo sought a recording contract:

"I sent him to Chicago and when he went to Chicago he met Tampa Red and Big Bill, and Tampa Red found Melrose."

Lester Melrose, the freelance talent scout employed by RCA Victor and other companies, had a virtual monopoly of 'Race' recording and he must have been impressed with his new artist. On June 20, 1941 Maceo wrote from Tampa's house at 3432 S. State Street:

"I arrive in Chicago at 3pm and arrive safely Baby I will record Tuesday Melrose said and don't you worry just be a good girl because I am a good boy listen baby I really have miss you I look like I have bin here 2 weeks already listen darling Miss Tampa and my accompaniment, and on two of the numbers Baby Don't think of me for not writing more but we are so busy I and Tampa until I am worn out. So you just be sweet until your husband come home your husband
M Meriweather
PS Write soon and let me no just how you are getting along your baby MNR"

That following Tuesday June 24 Maceo accompanied Tampa Red on eight sides and recorded six numbers under his own name. It was a startling debut.

His prodigious technique was evident from the start but combined with a thoroughly traditional Blues style it was a great contrast to Melrose's house pianists like Black Bob, Horace Malcolm, Simeon Henry or Blind John Davis who would have sounded more at home with jazz groups. With Tampa's sympathetic accompaniment, and on two of the numbers Ransom Knowling's string bass, it was a far cry from the increasingly sophisticated small group accompaniments that Melrose had used with some of his singers. Blind John Davis was always particularly scornful of the typical Bluesman's inadequate musical training but he would have found it hard to fault Maceo. Apart from the common keys used by most pianists, C and G, Maceo also played (on *Cowboy Jail Blues*) in B-flat which hinted at an ability to fit in with much larger bands and Big Bill Broonzy was later to confirm Maceo's grasp of musical theory when recounting their many musical arguments.

Maceo's Blues use a four to the bar bass in which a chord is struck on each beat and frequently incorporates a characteristic bass run at the end of each sequence. This may have been taught him by Tampa Red who played piano himself in a somewhat similar style as evidenced by his 1936 recording *Someday I'm Bound to Win*. But Maceo's main trademark, the tremendously powerful bass, has a simple explanation—he was left-handed. Another feature of Maceo's playing is the extent to which he used earlier piano styles as a framework within which to create a new composition; *Ramblin' Mind Blues* for example from this first session closely resembles Roosevelt Sykes' *Highway 61 Blues*. As well as the conventional 12-bar sequence he also made use of an 8-bar sequence as in *Worried Little Blues*, a clever variation of Sleepy John Estes' *Someday Baby*, which established his name for all time as the song passed into the repertoire of countless Bluesmen. The most traditional source of Negro folklore is drawn upon for *Can't You Read*, a fascinating musical version of the 'toast' *The Monkey and the Baboon*. A little local color is added with verses about the 'toast' which is interesting to speculate how much of this material he performed for Hattie, who knows the song as 'Elite Fish', remembers how Maceo and the band would come back to their house after work and spend the night 'drinking and telling them lies!'



Apart from his pianistic ability Maceo had another great drawing card. He was a very moving singer and the energy and aggression of his piano playing always seemed subordinate to a special inner sadness in his voice which coaxed every ounce of dolor from the reflective blues he generally favored. The exuberance of a song like *Can't You Read* is in direct contrast to the quiet pessimism steeped in his own songs. The titles say it all—*Bye Bye Baby*, *Why Should I Hang Around*, *So Long Baby*, *Anytime for You*—time and time again his lyrics evoked a particular mood of fatalism. Maceo was clearly a valuable addition to Melrose's roster of artists and Hattie added meaningfully:

"Melrose was as crazy about them as he could be because they made his living."

There were further visits to the studios when in December 1941 Maceo recorded another six sides (all in the uncommon key of B-flat) and February 1942 accompanied Tampa on another eight sides. Then in the July of that year he cut his own last four sides before the studio shutters came down. The previously unissued *Some Sweet Day*, in the key of E-flat, further demonstrates Maceo's technical proficiency while the again unissued *My Last Go Round* shows his traditional background with its strong echoes of the St. Louis pianists and Henry Brown in particular.

For this first year as a recording artist Maceo lived with Hattie in Detroit, making frequent journeys to Chicago. He still played house-parties in Detroit with a reputation enhanced by a big hit record. Hattie remembers:

"Well he's at my house and I took the kitty-¹know the kitty-box and I carried it around and when I carried it around they filled that so full from then on he went to using a kitty-box. I would go around writing everybody's song what couldn't get a turn 'cause there's so many people there. And I'd go 'round and ask who want to hear this who want to hear that. They be hollerin' 'Play so-and-so Maceo' . . . play this, that and the other. And they'd say Miss Maceo, Miss Maceo have Big Maceo play my piece and I'd go around taking everybody's names, everybody's piece they wanted played and carry them to him. And he wouldn't play all way through . . . There was so many people wanted *Worried Life* he just play it once or twice. And he made money like that. And people done paid . . . fifty more people done told him to play *Worried Life* and he just played it once or twice."

In Detroit "he played all through Black Bottom" but his regular stamping grounds were The Post on Warren Avenue on the West Side, Brown's Bar and the Crystal Bar on Hastings and a beer garden, El Vido's, at Mack & Russell. Maceo's ability to play with brass and reed players is already hinted at is confirmed by surviving group photos from Brown's Bar which show him with a band including a trumpeter and at least one sax player. They must have put on a big show for as Hattie nicely puts it:

"Guys played guitar and all kinds of tooty-horns and then he had girls singing"

These were the good years. Work was plentiful, Hattie and Maceo had a daughter, Majorette, and it seemed as though the good times would continue. Maceo was on the road a lot and in April 1944 he wrote from 2218 W. Washington where he was staying with Big Bill to say he'd just got back off the road after the tour of Tennessee and was soon off to Atlanta for two weeks.

But from May 1944 for the rest of the year his letters make depressing reading as his troubles piled up. Mostly they are requests for money which Hattie would send but apart from unpaid bills there were problems with relatives:

" . . . I have got my coat stolen since I bin back to Chicago but don't worry about it when I come to Detroit I want my people to know that I aint no tramp."

Hattie joined him in Chicago later that month for a while and things picked up a little when Maceo started back to work. But not for long and July finds him staying at Tampa's, out of work again and still worrying about his clothes:

"My sister told someone to stop by to see was I ragged and had gone down like they heard."

Maceo wouldn't return to Detroit until he looked the part of the successful Bluesman:

"I did want to get me a overcoat before I come home listen Baby give me tin to get some of my thing I want to be fix just right"

In August he had "been kindy sick" but the most harrowing letter came on September 12, 1944:

" . . . I love you more than the world but I am in a mess I don't need no money or nothing like that and Dont think that I want to keep you in suspense you know Darling I bought me a suit an a few other things and I bin trying to wait until they start recording . . . I am a porter on a train from Chicago to San Francisco Cal and I cant quit at present . . . whenever I get a chance I am coming home to you and will never leave you again Dont think hard of me Baby for not coming when I told you I am just in a mess that I will haffter clear up myself but as fare as my welair and health I am all right . . ."

The American Federation of Musicians under their President J. C. Petrillo had banned recording afraid of the effect of juke boxes on the livelihoods of their members but it had manifestly failed in its intentions—at least as far as the professional urban Bluesman was concerned. If Maceo had to get work as a train porter no wonder he was waiting "until they start recording" but there wasn't long to wait for towards the end of the year the ban was lifted, and in December, Tampa had a session with Blind John Davis on piano. Things were about to improve and 1945 was to be a good year for Maceo. Ironically it was his last good year too.

Presumably this is when he and Big Bill got together again as Broonzy recalls when he took Maceo with him to Gatewood's famous club on Chicago's West Side at Lake & S. Campbell:

"The first night we played Big Maceo rocked the house and I didn't have to sing but one or two songs."

After this they talked about forming a trio and added drummer Little T (Tyrell Dixon) and later, bass player Little Joe and sax-man Buster Bennett joined in. Big Bill had a recording date in February 1945 and Maceo, Bennett and Little T they cut 12 sides. Then a few days later Maceo had his own session with Tampa and Little T and proved that the sporadic activity of the last couple of years had not affected his prowess. *Kidman Blues* was a fine up-tempo start to his second recording career and it was noticeable from further sessions in the year that in keeping with the times Maceo's tempos were increasing. In order to give an added lift to an instrumental chorus Maceo frequently switched to an 8-to-the-bar "walking" octave bass and this, one of the oldest boogie basses, he used almost exclusively on the faster numbers. The incompared *Chicago Breakdown*, a solo of immense drive and power, incorporates another unique trademark, an ascending and descending left-hand run in semi-tones, very difficult for any but a left-handed pianist. But it would be very wrong to think of Maceo as a one-dimensional pianist for many characteristics of his right-hand work were imitated later by players as diverse as Otis Spann and, on occasion, Ray Charles. The traditional influences were still all there in his post-war sessions—Maceo's 32-20 employed a variant of the 44 Blues theme. *Come On Home* again reminiscent of Henry Brown while *Big Road Blues* was a fine piano version of the classic Tommy Johnson song. Broonzy's group broke up and Maceo, as a result of these successful sessions, went on the road again. He later rejoined Tampa Red working at the Flame Club, 3020 S. Indiana, and recorded with him. He also accompanied Sonny Boy Williamson on one recording date and Tampa again in February 1946. This was to be the last session with Maceo at the height of his powers for his second period of fame was as short-lived as the first. About mid-1946 came the cruellest blow of all when Maceo suffered a stroke in Milwaukee and was admitted to the People's Hospital. Roy blamed the travelling life for it.

"They call him from New Orleans, 'Be here tomorrow night . . . I don't care what time of night it was, he'd get out

of the bed and they pick him up in a car and take him down to New Orleans. They let him play all day and night two and then again, let him lay down and rest awhile. Right back to Detroit or Detroit again and that's how he had his stroke, on account of he didn't rest enough."

The resultant paralysis of his right side virtually ended his piano playing days though he was to struggle for some seven years. Hattie sent their daughter Majorette to live with an aunt and came to Chicago to nurse her husband. Maceo recovered and was still popular enough to warrant a recording session for Melrose in February 1947 and with Eddie Boyd taking over the piano stool, he sang four numbers. But after this very successful session Melrose dropped him. Hattie would return to Detroit from time to time to look after the house and Maceo's letters gave an idea of his pitiful existence.

March 10th 1948

"I am as well as you expect But Baby I want you to send me \$20 to get me a Ray Lamp . . . the Doctor say I had to have a Ray Lamp"

Back in the hospital in May and trying to get sick pay:

"Hattie the company say I would hafta to get my Badge. Before I can get any money. Will you please sin it to me ratway . . . I am in the Hospital in taking treatment . . . I am trying to get well But please send my Badge the ONE with the picture in it."

Then in April that year Maceo had some good fortune when Art Rube of Specialty came into the city looking for talent and was directed to Maceo whom he discovered sick in bed. Maceo, desperate for money, struggled to the session and Johnnie Jones (whom Maceo had taken under his wing about January 1945) soon after he'd arrived in Chicago and taught him the elements of his style) played piano in a close imitation of Big Maceo. Maceo, sick as he was, sang 4 numbers beautifully in that soft, warm smoky-brown voice.

In May he was writing his wife again for \$10 and then in June, after Hattie had sent some money, came the most poignant letter of all:

"I got a little job trying to get my hand and legs like they was I am praying for them to get well so I can be Big Maceo again"

September was worse—although there were hopes held out of his playing again there was also the Colonial department store in Detroit threatening him with jail over an unpaid bill of \$24.30. But at least some of Maceo's prayers must have been answered for, incredibly, he was actually back on the road at the beginning of January 1950. On the 18th of that month he was in Bowling Green, Kentucky and on his way to Knoxville, Tennessee. Then February 10th he was in New Orleans. But back in Chicago in August it was the same old story, working just enough to pay the rent and buy cigarettes.

About 1951 or 1952 Big Maceo teamed up with the Chicago busband and wife team, guitarist John and harmonica player Grace Brim, after meeting them in the H&T Club on State Street and they took off for Detroit where Maceo cut his last records. With another pianist—by the right-hand man while Maceo played the left it was all very sad—by no stretch of the imagination was he 'Big Maceo' again.

Maceo's popularity was such that, apart from his influence on the Chicago pianists Johnnie Jones, Otis Spann and Henry Gray, he inspired a host of imitators:

"There used to be a whole lot of Maceos, Maceo Charles and Maceo this-that-and-the-other right here in Detroit"

But one Little Maceo was actually his brother Rozier (R.Z.) or 'Bob'. He had learned his piano playing in Detroit and:

"he could play every piece Maceo played. He could play better than Maceo. Maceo he was kinda funny. Bob could have been on records but Maceo wouldn't put Bob on records and he wouldn't take him to Melrose. He didn't want nobody to get up there with him."

Little Maceo was a familiar figure around the streets of the city, pushing a cart and dropping in to play house-parties. Sadly he too has now passed on. Obviously the Meriwethers were a talented family, (Rev. Meriwether's son Roy Jr., is a fine professional jazz pianist and left-handed too like his uncle), but where did Maceo get his style?

"He got it all out of a spiritual evenin'," says Roy. "I don't know any other way they taught Major"

Hattie agrees:

"He just picked it up himself. Why, he was a teacher—he taught people. People would come and he would teach 'em how to play. He could play it any way, couldn't he? Play it backwards, cross his hands over—he could play a piano"

Maceo the man as opposed to Maceo the musician begins to emerge from the shadows a little. Proud and brave he certainly was as seen from his letters and that he was popular and much loved by the other artists is evident. If he was jealous of his brother R.Z., then Detroit pianist Boogie Woogie Red paints a different picture of his idol, Maceo:

"I used to sit right there and look at his mouth when he played the piano and I have my elbow on the piano. And I wanted to play with him so bad. He took an interest in me 'cause I was interested in him. See I was too young to go on the piano but Maceo say, 'No, look this is my nephew. Let him get up there.'"

Hattie adds, sometimes with more sentiment than accuracy:

"Everybody liked him—all the policemen—he was a good condition person. He was very nice—he wasn't a person to raise sand, fight or nothing."

But according to Roy, some of the Meriwethers had tempers and Maceo was no exception:

"He got into trouble once or twice I believe—well, Major would fight so—he would fight. He'd mix up with you—very good condition boy—he got cut once on his jaw"

He did of course drink heavily and Hattie has the last word:

"I think he'd have been well but he didn't stop drinking—I kept after him about drinking and he could drink an awful lot. 'Y'know I couldn't make him live. He tried to put the lights out in Detroit and then he went on to Chicago and tried to put the lights out"

The lights finally went out for Big Maceo on February 26th 1953 at 7:15 A.M. when he suffered his final attack. His body was shipped to Detroit for burial on March 3rd.

MIKE ROWE, 1975

(author of "Chicago Breakdown")

DISCOGRAPHY

Recorded 6/24/41 Maceo Merriweather, piano and vocals; Tampa Red, guitar

- WORRIED LIFE BLUES (BS-064190-1) Bluebird B 8827-B
- RAMBLIN' MIND BLUES (BS-064191-1A) Bluebird B 8798-B
- COUNTY JAIL BLUES (BS-064192-1) Bluebird B 8798-A
- CAN'T YOU READ (BS-064193-1) Bluebird B 8772-A
- Tampa Red, vocal
- SO LONG BABY (BS-064194-1) Bluebird B 8772-B
- TEXAS BLUES (BS-064195-1) Bluebird B 8227-A

Recorded 12/19/41 add Alfred Elkins, bass

- TUFF LUCK BLUES (BS-070633-1) Bluebird B 8973-B
- I GOT THE BLUES (BS-070634-1) Bluebird B 8939-A
- IT'S ALL UP TO YOU (BS-070635-1A) Bluebird B 8973-A
- BYE BYE BABY (BS-070636-1) Bluebird B 9012-A
- WHY SHOULD I HANG AROUND (BS-070637-1) Bluebird B 8939-B
- POOR KELLY BLUES (BS-070638-1) Bluebird B 9012-B

Recorded 7/28/42 add Clifford "Snags" Jones, drums replaces Elkins

- SOME SWEET DAY (BS-074638-1A) unissued
- ANYTIME FOR YOU (BS-074639-1) 34-0703-A
- MY LAST GO ROUND (BS-074640-1) unissued
- SINCE YOU BEEN GONE (BS-074641-1) 34-0703-B

Recorded 2/26/45 Maceo Merriweather, piano and vocals; Tampa Red, guitar; Melvin Draper, drums

- KIDMAN BLUES (DSAB316-1A) 34-0735-A
- I'M SO WORRIED (DSAB317-1A) 20-2505-A
- THINGS HAVE CHANGED (DSAB318-1) 34-0735-B
- MY OWN TROUBLES (DSAB319-1A) 20-2353-A

Recorded 7/5/45 Tyrrell Dixon, drums replaces Draper

- MACEO'S 32-20 (DSAB350-1A) 20-2028-A
- COME ON HOME (DSAB351-1A) 20-2173-B
- TEXAS STOMP (DSAB352-1A) 20-2028-B
- DETROIT JUMP (DSAB353-1A) 20-2173-A

Recorded 10/19/45 Chick Sanders, drums replaces Dixon

- WINTER TIME BLUES (DSAB1204-1A) 34-0743-B
- WON'T BE A FOOL NO MORE (DSAB1205-1A) 20-1870-B
- BIG ROAD BLUES (DSAB1206-1A) 34-0743-A
- CHICAGO BREAKDOWN (DSAB1207-1A) 34-0743-A

Recorded 2/27/47 Maceo, vocal; Eddie Boyd, piano; Tampa Red, guitar; Ernest Crawford, bass; Chick Sanders, drums

- BROKE AND HUNGRY BLUES (D7VB338-1) 20-2687-A
- IF YOU EVER CHANGE YOUR WAYS (D7VB339-1) 20-2510-A
- IT'S ALL OVER NOW (D7VB340-1) 20-2505-B
- I LOST MY LITTLE WOMAN (D7VB341-1A) 20-2553-B

All selections recorded in Chicago.

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