

## **The Representation of Trains in Meade Lux Lewis's *Honky Tonk Train***

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Ostinato variation form, although most commonly associated with Western art music, also appears in the piano playing style of boogie-woogie. The repeating bass line, combined with the use of small melodic motives in the upper voices, conforms to the traditional ostinato style, but without always employing traditional tonal harmony. Boogie-woogie evolved from a blues-guitar technique to become a style that is primarily played on the piano and is marked by the portrayal of different emotions from that of the blues. Whereas the blues traditionally depicts sadness and sorrow, boogie-woogie is associated with dancing and fun.<sup>1</sup> This paper discusses the use of ostinato form in boogie-woogie, while highlighting important outside influences to the style, through an analysis of Meade Lux Lewis's *Honky Tonk Train*. This piece draws on the use of dissonance and short semitone-movement motives in order to portray the sounds of trains.

For the purpose of this essay, only the early formation of boogie-woogie will be examined. Meade Lux Lewis's *Honky Tonk Train* is considered to be part of the "second-era" boogie-woogie style, but the use of train motives and repeated dotted rhythms in the bass are associated with the early development of the style. The use of train-sound metaphors in piano styles was implemented because of the African-American slaves' involvement with the construction of the national railway system. After hearing the railroad sounds all day, the workers brought them into their playing at the barrelhouses and boogie halls at night; therefore, the use of train-sound metaphors was most likely passed down to Lewis through this tradition of railroad workers.

Little research has been conducted on boogie-woogie piano and its role in the history of jazz and blues piano idioms. In regards to the analysis of the boogie-woogie style through individual pieces, scholarly research is almost nonexistent. This could be due, perhaps, to the aural nature of this style; it is rarely notated, a key factor influencing the analytical approach to music. For this analysis, a transcription of a December 1927

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<sup>1</sup> John Tension, "Boogie Woogie," <http://nonjohn.com/History%20of%20Boogie%20Woogie.htm> (Accessed October 19, 2005).

recording produced in Chicago from Eric Kriss's book, *Barrelhouse and Boogie Piano (1973)* will be used.<sup>2 3</sup>

## Meade Lux Lewis

The creator of *Honky Tonk Train*, Meade Lux Lewis, is considered a seminal performer in the boogie-woogie piano style. He was one of the original entertainers using this style during its peak in the 1930s and also its chief performer during its resurgence in the 1940s. He was born on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1905 in Chicago, Illinois, and was heavily influenced by the playing styles of Jimmy Yancey and Pine Top Smith.<sup>4</sup> When he began performing, Lewis could not read music very well. As Silvester notes:

He had a very good ear for melody, extemporizing and ad-libbing constantly and he used these abilities when playing standard tunes. He has been quoted as saying, on one occasion when asked if he read music: 'They show me the music man, and man, it looks like Chinese to me. If I could hum it, I was off and gone.'<sup>5</sup>

This did not stop him from taking boogie-woogie from the barrelhouses to concert stages. On February 7<sup>th</sup>, 1964, Lewis died in Minneapolis in a car crash.

## The Early Formation of Boogie-woogie Piano Style

Boogie-woogie style is believed to have developed out of a blues guitar-playing technique. As with many aurally transmitted styles of music making, numerous people are attributed to the origin of this style, but there is no reliable way to determine one definitive originator. A few aspects that are agreed upon include: it began in the Deep South, in Texas in particular; is marked by quick tempos and dynamic rhythms; and is associated with African-Americans:

Boogie Woogie piano playing originated in the lumber and turpentine camps of Texas and in the sporting houses of that state. A fast, rolling bass—giving the piece an undercurrent of tremendous power—power piano playing... In Houston, Dallas, and Galveston—all Negro piano players played that way. This style was often referred to as a 'fast western' or 'fast blues' as differentiated from the 'slow blues' of New Orleans and St. Louis. At these gatherings the ragtime and blues boys could easily tell from what section of the country a man came, even going so far as to name the town, by his interpretation of a piece.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the recording of *Honky Tonk Train* that Kriss used for his transcription is not available. Alternatively, a recording from *Atlantic Blues: Piano* will be used for aural reference. Problematically, though, this recording also contains more than three versus as well as bass and drums.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Kriss, *Barrelhouse and Boogie* (New York: Oak Publications, 1973), 53-55.

<sup>4</sup> African American Registry, "Meade Lux Lewis,"

[http://www.aaregistry.com/african\\_american\\_history/1149/Meade\\_Lux\\_Lewis\\_true\\_Boogie\\_Woogie\\_piano](http://www.aaregistry.com/african_american_history/1149/Meade_Lux_Lewis_true_Boogie_Woogie_piano) (Accessed November 1, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Peter J. Silvester, *A Left Hand Like God* (New York: Da Capo Press Inc., 1988), 217.

<sup>6</sup> E. Simms Campbell, "Blues," in *Jazzmen*, ed. F. Ramsey and C.E. Smith (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939) 112-113.

The 'Boogie Woogie' originated in Texas many years ago. It wasn't called the 'Boogie Woogie' then. George Thomas was the fellow who used this style and first wrote it down.<sup>7</sup>

Peter Silvester, in his book *A Left Hand Like God*, thoroughly addresses the development of boogie-woogie from a style of blues guitar playing. He notes that the syncopated rhythm of the guitar was easily transferred to the piano, while the right hand of the pianist could fill in for the singer's voice. This stride, as it is known, showed a more developed piano technique, but was "unpopular with unschooled pianists because of the superior technique required for playing them,"<sup>8</sup> thus, the stride bass evolved into the boogie-woogie bass for ease of playing.<sup>9</sup> Silvester describes how blues vocal techniques evolved into boogie-woogie:

The subtle embellishments supporting the singer's lyrics were discarded and replaced in the treble by short repeated phrases, runs, sharply struck chords, repeated single notes and trills which emphasized rhythm at the expense of melody. Where the guitar player switched between playing in the bass and treble ranges of his instrument, the pianist was able to produce a continuous series of varied and contrasting tones at the same time in both registers, each hand working independently – a defining attribute of boogie-woogie playing. The left hand would repeat endlessly an ostinato bass pattern moving to the three blues-chord positions...while the right hand supported or played across the bass rhythm, and in so doing, produced complex cross-rhythms.<sup>10</sup>

### Formal Characteristics of Boogie-woogie Style

John Tennison, in his *History of Boogie Woogie* website, outlines eight elements needed to create the boogie-woogie feel:

1. Ostinato – a syncopated bass line outlining the 12-bar blues chord progression.
2. Swing Pulse – The swing pulse can either be contained within the left hand (intrinsic swing pulse) or through a combination of the right and left hands (interactional swing pulse).
3. Syncopation – As with the swing pulse, this can occur in either of both hands.
4. Polyrhythmic interplay – This interplay occurs between the two hands as they play off one another.
5. Highly percussive, and often melodic, right-hand part – often staccato and rhythmically complex.
6. Left hand is frequently melodic and contrapuntal to the right hand – can give the effect that more than one person is playing at a time
7. Strong sense of tonicity.
8. Often 12-bar blues form.<sup>11</sup>

*Honky Tonk Train* conforms to all these necessary elements and it should be noted that it contains three presentations of the ostinato bass progression.

<sup>7</sup> Clarence Williams, *Clarence Williams Presents* (New York: Clarence Williams Publishing Company, 1940), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Silvester, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Silvester, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Silvester, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Tennison.

In the evolution of blues to boogie-woogie, the style maintained the use of the 12-bar blues pattern. In order to show the subtle differences, though, the following is a chart<sup>12</sup> of a typical 12-bar blues chord progression followed by a typical boogie-woogie chord progression:

Fig. 1

I	I	I	I	IV	IV	I	I	V	IV	I	I	12 bar blues
I	IV7	I	I7	IV7	IV7	I	I	V7(IV7)	I	V7	I	12 bar blues
I	IV7	I	I7	IV7	I	IIIm7	V7	I	IIIm7-V7	I	I	Typical boogie
I	I	I	I	IV	IV	I	I	V7	V7	I	I	<i>Honky Tonk Train</i>

As it can be seen with this chart, in typical progressions, the fundamental shift from I - VI - I - V - IV - I is usually maintained, but with the addition of 7<sup>th</sup> chords, or the IIIm7 substituting for IV; the presence of a minor chord is used in order to provide textural variety. In *Honky Tonk Train*, the pattern is closer to that of the typical 12-bar blues, but this progression does not take into account the neighbouring pattern which, although it does not necessarily function within the harmony, does, nevertheless, provide aural interest and an increase in momentum. In the notation of the measures which outline the I chords, for example, (and this occurs throughout the piece on the different chords) the bass alternates between a first inversion GM chord and D7 chord without the F#.

This shift from the GM chord to the D7, however, could also be seen as tying into the semitone movement motive (to be discussed later in detail), with the movement of the B to the C. In this organization, the D of the second inversion GM chord is a pedal point and the A is a continuation of the G chord with a GM9. Alternatively, the A could also be considered as originating from the semitone movement motives, but for increased consonance and ease of playing, have been raised from the A<sub>b</sub> to an A<sub>♯</sub>.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas.

Ex. 2: *Honky Tonk Train*, m.3

Considering the overall ostinato pattern of the bass, it is very tempting to side with the pedal point theory, considering that in each chord change, the chord remains in second inversion form, maintaining the 5<sup>th</sup> of the chord as the lowest note, and the upper bass voices alternate with the modified semitone motive movement. For example, when the chord progression changes to IV, there is a G pedal point (CM second inversion chord) with the upper bass voices alternating between E and F $\sharp$ , and the middle bass note alternating between the modified semitone movement of C to D. The exception to this is when the progression moves to V7 – here the chord is always in root position.

The syncopated rhythm of this bass pattern is crucial to the boogie-woogie style, but the use of pedal points and second inversion chords is atypical. Even in a 1951 recording of the same song for Atlantic Blues, Lewis discarded the second inversion chord pattern in favour of a two quarter-note broken chord pattern in strict 4/4 time, in which the drummer filled in the typical boogie-woogie syncopation. According to Silvester, the use of broken chords was to accommodate the high speed of playing that Lewis developed in the 1950s as his piano technique increased with lessons.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, the original recording that Eric Kriss created this transcription from is not available, so as to be able to compare whether or not Lewis originally employed second inversion chords or if it was a decision made by Kriss.

### Extramusical Elements of Boogie-woogie in *Honky Tonk Train*

John Tennison traces the development of boogie-woogie back to the field hollers of African American slave workers and arguably, to ostinato African drumming techniques (hence the ostinato bass pattern).<sup>14</sup> But the influence of the sounds of the railway is of primary importance, both to the style as a whole and to *Honky Tonk Train* in particular. Prior to the public's conception of this style and the abolition of slavery, the sounds of steam locomotives were heard by slaves working on railroad construction. These sounds were carried over into dancehalls (barrelhouses), where musicians would incorporate them into their songs.<sup>15</sup> This use of train sounds emphasizes the fact that boogie-woogie was created with short melodic motives through learned aural techniques. As Silvester writes:

Boogie-woogie was music of its time and it was shaped by elemental sounds heard and memorized by pianists. Trains provided endless themes, as it was possible to represent the haunting sound of whistles, expresses romping along on a full head of steam, wheel clattering over points and, of course, the insistent rhythm of the driving wheels.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Silvester, 217.

<sup>14</sup> Tennison.

<sup>15</sup> Tennison.

<sup>16</sup> Silvester, 6.

Although his argument is laden with socio-musicological critical problems concerning the essentialization of African Americans, Wilfrid Mellers refers to this association with trains as a myth to cover up the sexualization of the boogie-woogie style. He notes that,

The Negro’s obsession with the railroad has become a twentieth-century myth. The railway train – powerful at the head, snake-like in elongation – is probably a phallic image; and the railway also opened up and ravished the American wilderness.<sup>17</sup>

Concerning *Honky Tonk Train* in particular, Mellers notes,

the thrust of the chunky left-hand’s triads generates an immense momentum, which is enhanced by the right hand’s fantastically complex (though of course intuitive) cross-rhythms. The interlocked energy of the rhythms is vigorously sexual; but again the orgasm is incomplete. We cannot conceive of motion except in relation to passion, feeling, growth; here, we are “sent” by the rhythm into a state of trance because we experience it without reference to melody or even harmony—for the note-clusters are, for the most part, percussive dissonances. For this reason, the motion itself becomes a kind of immobility; and the piece ends, through inanition, in the same way as *Indiana Avenue Stomp*. The train chuffs to stillness, just as the pendulum of the stomp’s clock surrenders motion.<sup>18</sup>

Analyzing *Honky Tonk Train* shows no indication of sexuality beyond rhythmic intensity. Meller’s argument is merely an attempt to diminish the boogie-woogie style as part of the myth of the over-sexualized African American male as something to be feared. As with many styles associated with African Americans, there is an attempt to illegitimize it to further suppress minority races.

Railroad-inspired motives are present in *Honk Tonk Train*, much more so than any sexual metaphors. The piece opens with what could be signified as a train sounding its horn in order to alert passengers of its departure. This is accomplished with an augmented D7 chord. Although the piece is in GM, the tonality is not fully established with the presence of a GM chord ( I ) until the third measure, which also marks the beginning of the ostinato bass pattern. The opening two measures, therefore, serve as an introduction and strengthen the extra-musical association with train-sounds.

Ex. 3: *Honky Tonk Train*, m.1-2

<sup>17</sup> Wilfrid Mellers, *Music in a New Found Land* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1964), 276.

<sup>18</sup> Mellers, 276.

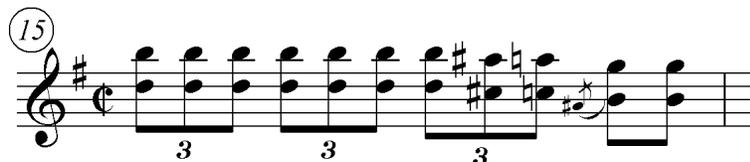
The second measure, which is important for establishing the semitone-movement motive, is played at a slower tempo<sup>19</sup> than the remainder of the song, also tying into the metaphor of a departing train. The departure occurs in measure three, where the ostinato bass pattern begins as a solo for that measure.

The extensive use of repeating small figures, as well as the semitone movement and the use of dissonance to represent horns, also tie into the train metaphor. To complement the augmented D7 chord that begins the piece, the train horn sound returns in each of the three choruses. To increase the dissonance, the “horn chords” are played cross-rhythmically to the bass syncopation. In order to be considered a horn-chord, the chord must employ this cross-rhythm and must be a repeating chord. In the first chorus, the horn chord occurs during the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> (m.7-8) measures of the progression; in the second chorus, it occurs in the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> (m.21-22) measures; and in the third, it only occurs in the 4<sup>th</sup> (m.30). In the first chorus, as well as the third, they are played as triplet quarter notes in 4/4 time, and in the third chorus, they are presented as a five versus four rhythm. Tonally, the first presentation of the horn-chord occurs during the measure outlining IV and adds the 9 to the augmented D7 chord. The dissonance decreases with the second chorus presentation in m.21. Here, both the right and left hands outline the GM tonal center of the piece, but with the addition of the flattened 3<sup>rd</sup>. The same occurs in the third chorus, but earlier within the ostinato progression.

As noted above, paired with the dissonant “horn chord”, the use of a semitone movement motive is also important in establishing the extramusical effect of train sounds. Most of *Honky Tonk Train* is centered on this motive as a means to create short episodes of dissonance and tonal variety. After the two measure introduction, where this motive is first presented (and the previously discussed use of semitones in the ostinato bass), it returns in the inner voices of the right hand in m.4-6. Here, there is an alteration between the B<sub>b</sub> and the B<sub>♮</sub>, which plays with the G major tonality of the piece, but ultimately ending on a solid GM chord in the 6<sup>th</sup> measure before moving to the IV chord in the bass.

The majority of the second chorus is based on this semitone-movement motive from the introduction, using not only semitone movement, but outlining the same exact notes as the original presentation. Instead of an introduction, though, the introductory motive is played on the downbeat of the beginning of the ostinato progression, but with more intensity. This is accomplished by quicker tempo and the repetition of the D/B figure 7 times before breaking into the semitone movement.

Ex. 4: *Honky Tonk Train*, m.15



<sup>19</sup> As heard in the 1951 recording by Lewis of *Honky Tonk Train*. This recording also contains a lengthy introduction, which strengthens the argument that these opening measures signify the slow departure of a train.

M.14 uses the last 5 notes of m.15, played in retrograde, as a lead up to m.17, which is an exact repetition of m.15. M.16 is repeated again in m.18, but this time the intensity of the motive is slowed down to the original introduction's rhythm, and ends at m.20 on A $\sharp$ /G over a CM bass in order to build up to the dissonance of the horn chords in the next measure.

In the third chorus, the semitone movement has been inverted from the M6<sup>th</sup> interval utilized in the introduction and second chorus, to minor thirds. This is most likely carried over from the last beat of measure 5.

Ex.5: *Honky Tonk Train*, m.5 and m. 33



### The Use of the Flattened 3<sup>rd</sup>

The majority of the presentations of the semitone-movement motive center on the use of the flattened 3<sup>rd</sup> in the G major tonality of this piece. The flattened 3<sup>rd</sup> is integral to the blues scale, as well as the flattened 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>. Interestingly, though, the flattened 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> are used in this piece through the semitone-movement motives, yet neither are as essential to the harmony and construction of the piece as the flattened 3<sup>rd</sup>. There are three functions for the flattened 3<sup>rd</sup> in *Honky Tonk Train*: ornamental, harmonic, and outlining semitone movement. The use of the flattened 3<sup>rd</sup>, in regards to the semitone-movement motive, has already been discussed, so the focus will now shift to its harmonic and ornamental functions.

The flattened third is integral to the blues and boogie-woogie sound. The flattened third creates tonal ambiguity and is often employed in the right hand while maintaining the normal third in the accompaniment (in the major blues – in the minor blues scale, all thirds are flattened).<sup>20</sup> As discussed with the horn chords, tonal ambiguity, accomplished through the flat 3<sup>rd</sup>, occurs in the very first chord of the piece and does not resolve until the third measure, when the ostinato bass begins. In m.4, however, the flat 3<sup>rd</sup> returns in the right hand to highlight the dissonance created between the alteration movements in the bass. Here, the flat 3<sup>rd</sup> falls on the 2<sup>nd</sup> beat, where the bass is outlining D/A/C and the upper hand is outlining G/B $\flat$ /E. If we understand the D in the bass to be a pedal point, then the chord could be considered an Am7, with the addition of the flat 3<sup>rd</sup> (in the GM scale) for increased dissonance and tonal ambiguity. The resolution of this chord into a solid GM chord in the next beat re-affirms tonality, as well as the GM chord of the downbeat of the next measure (marking the end of this 2-bar sequence).

Kriss's transcription of *Honky Tonk Train* alternates between the notation of A $\sharp$  and B $\flat$ , to refer to the flat 3<sup>rd</sup>. In tonal analysis, this would be a key determinant to how one would

<sup>20</sup> Thomas.

be to analyze these chords, but to someone like Lewis, these notes are tonally one in the same. As he could not understand musical notation, he relied on the sound of the chord, instead of how the notation of it could be interpreted.

Ex. 6: *Honky Tonk Train*, m.4

The resolution of the flat 3<sup>rd</sup> to the GM chord in order to re-establish tonality is important to this piece. In the majority of the instances where the flat 3<sup>rd</sup> functions as harmony, the resolution is to GM. This sequence is secured at the ending (codetta) in m.38, where instead of a traditional I6/4 – V – I cadence, there is an addition of the flat 3<sup>rd</sup> in the V chord as a substitution for the F#. As expected, this resolves to the I, but with the addition of the flat 7<sup>th</sup> (F<sub>b</sub>). Once again, the tonality is undermined, in order to preserve movement and a sense that the song has not fully ended. Like the train, there is the possibility of potential movement in the future.

Ex. 7: *Honky Tonk Train*, m.38

Whereas most harmonic occurrences of the flat 3<sup>rd</sup> resolve almost immediately to GM, in the ending sequence of all three choruses, the resolution is prolonged for two full measures. Instead of functioning as an inner note within a chord for tonal ambiguity, here the A#/B<sub>b</sub> is highlighted as a dominant note. All movement in these measures leads up to the A#, especially in the second half of this sequence, where the A# is repeated 4 times in an upper register. This sequence is also highlighting the resolution of the V to the I. The built-up tension of the A# culminates in the resolution to G, or I.

Ex. 8: *Honky Tonk Train*, m.11



Ornamentally, the flat third functions either as a “crushed note” or as a passing note. All of these passing-note motives progress as A-A#-B, usually as a triplet leading into a horn chord motive or into the ending sequence, perhaps as a signifier that the end of the chorus is near. The “crushed note” ornament is seen in the introduction, as well as m.5 and m.17. It is essentially used to imitate a singer’s voice. Whereas a singer can sing in-between tones, the piano must play two notes almost simultaneously in order to give an effect of the tone between the notes.

### ***Honky Tonk Train* Form/Structure**

In most variation forms, the number of variations and their order is important to the overall effect of the piece. In the boogie-woogie style, however, the number of variations does not seem to be as crucial a factor. For example, this transcription of *Honky Tonk Train* contains three choruses, but in Lewis’s 1951 recording, he plays an astounding eleven choruses, including an extended introduction and codetta. As boogie-woogie is a very intuitive way of playing the piano, performers feel free to repeat choruses ad infinitum, to their own liking. For this reason, perhaps order of variations is more of a concern to the boogie-woogie style; but, as this is an intuitive way of playing, the performer should be free to improvise how he/she sees fit, in order to portray the piece as they feel/understand it. They could have an outline of how the song should sound in their head, but if the mood strikes, this overall construction could certainly be changed. Because of this style of playing, the plan used to construct these pieces is very fluid.

In this transcription of *Honky Tonk Train*, it seems that Lewis had an overall structure evident in his head before he recorded. The order of these three choruses makes logical sense, in that they build to a climax in the first measures of the third chorus. The increase in intensity is not accomplished through an increase in texture (the first chorus is the most dense texturally), but through a shift in register in the upper voices. Because the shift between the first and second chorus is not very large, the register shift does not become obvious until the climax of the third chorus, where it begins with a tremolo between the G and D two octaves above middle C. Following this tremolo, the horn chords in m.30 play into the register climax, by occurring an octave above where they were played in both the first and second choruses.

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*Honky Tonk Train* was originally performed by Lewis, a pianist who had no formal training in piano or ability to read music. It is interesting to see how his intuitive style of

playing the boogie-woogie can conform to certain accepted notions of tonal harmony, while still maintaining a blues-inflected style that relies on auralness versus notation. As with all boogie-woogie pieces, *Honky Tonk Train* can be considered a version of the traditional ostinato variation form. As you might have noticed, there was no intention made to lessen the boogie-woogie style because some sequences may, or may not, have conformed to tonal harmony "rules", but this paper merely functions as an analysis of how the piece was constructed entirely through improvisation. Transcriptions never tell the whole story of a piece, but give an adequate outline to how players may have performed on a certain day. Whereas un-notated popular music styles, such as boogie-woogie, have been relegated to the edges of analytical musicology, transcriptions show just how tonally and rhythmically complex they really are.

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