

THE BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE

Record Review

by Scott Alarik

Butch Thompson gets the soul of the song

The 88s: New Orleans Joys, Chicago Breakdown and Good Old New York. (Daring Records) - This fluid and easy, clever and brilliant essay on the roots of jazz piano is best defined by the three title cuts, all evocative cityscapes written by jazz pioneer Jelly Roll Morton (1890-1941), arguably the first jazz pianist and certainly Butch Thompson's strongest influence.

"New Orleans Joys" is a lilting, frisky love song to Morton's - and jazz's - home town, full of cascading yet relaxed trills and delighted, hopping runs. The recording opens with the joyful march-step of "Perfect Rag," also by Morton, as are 10 of the 14 selections. "Mamie's Blues," by Mamie Desdume but arranged by Morton, is stately, full of sweet dignity, and "Creepy Feeling" is amusingly spooky. "The Crave" is also like its title, full of dark longing, then breaking into bright daydreams. "Winin' Boy Blues" is enchantingly cinematic, full of sobs and gasps for breath as the piano teasingly mimics the whimpering. Throughout, the style is intelligent and mischievous, always light and easy.

"Chicago Breakdown" spills over with nervous bustle, honking bass chords, abruptness and motion. A dark Italian influence is felt in Thompson's "A Solas," punctuated by high, sighing blues runs. The playing is not always busy, as in Morton's "Sweet Substitute" and Clarence Williams' lonely, lolling

"Michigan Water Blues," but the style is more chordal, the blues influence adding a harder, often angry, edge.

In "Good Old New York," women in impossibly wide hats and men with arm garters and rakishly tipped bowlers can be felt strutting down Broadway. Where one tends to see busy streets in the Chicago tunes, sidewalks come to mind here. The piano often croons with show tunes such as Fats Waller's "Ain't Misbehavin'," played gently and jazzily here, and the pouting "Blue Turning Grey Over You," which suddenly breaks into a bright, happy step. The compositions are much more sophisticated, rich chords rolling out the melodies. James P. Johnson's "Blueberry Rhyme" is stately and nostalgic, his "Echo of Spring" rich with a poshness that evokes, perhaps mockingly, the stiff airs of 19th-century parlor music. Where the New Orleans style is playful and determinedly unpretentious, here it is elegant, dignified and a little bittersweet.

Thompson's playing, however quick, is never hurried. As jazz historian Eric Kriss writes in the liner notes (film-maker and novelist John Sayles also contributes notes), "He works with the spaces to get at the soul of the song." As characterized the jazz pioneers he pays tribute to here, Thompson always plays with a loose-fingered ease; you will never catch him working hard.

