
HERITAGE MUSIC REVIEW

*A MONTHLY GUIDE TO EARLY ROCK, BLUES, COUNTRY,
FOLK, AND TRADITIONAL JAZZ FOR THE SEATTLE AREA*

BUTCH THOMPSON SALUTES W. C. HANDY

By Doug Bright

To long-time fans of Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion", the sound of Butch Thompson's vintage piano jazz is unmistakable. Thanks to this Public Radio exposure, Thompson is America's best-known contemporary practitioner of the exuberant Harlem "stride" style developed in the 1920's and '30's by such keyboard masters as James P. Johnson, Willie "The Lion" Smith, and Fats Waller. Ever since 1962 when he joined The Hall Brothers' New Orleans Jazz Band in Minneapolis as a young man of 19, Thompson has dedicated his career to preserving and revitalizing classic jazz, devoting several tribute albums to the memory of its creators. His latest release on the Massachusetts based Daring label honors the composer of the immortal "St. Louis Blues," W. C. Handy.

As Thompson explains in the album's liner notes, his earliest inspiration came from the man whom the jazz world calls "the father of the blues." "Much has been written about Handy's music," he observes. "Some will tell you that there was nothing very original about it, that Handy somehow "stole" the folk music that was the blues, copyrighted it, and sat back to collect his royalties. Others say the idea of writing the music down was a stroke of genius. What seems clear is that people were eager to take the blues home and try to play it on the parlor upright. By age eleven I was an avid Handy admirer, having acquired the splendid 1954 recording "Louis Armstrong Plays W. C. Handy." That was how I learned "St. Louis Blues," playing along with Armstrong on my mother's parlor upright. It was a wonderful education."

Thompson's album, **LINCOLN AVENUE EXPRESS** (Daring 3027), explores all the pianistic possibilities created by that early education. All of the W. C. Handy compositions included here also appeared on Louis Armstrong's album, but while Armstrong placed them in the context of a full Dixieland band, Thompson plays them in a manner that pays eloquent tribute not only to their composer, but to the early jazz keyboard masters as well. In a program of multithematic, blues-based pieces drawn from Handy, Jelly Roll Morton, Fats Waller, and a few lesser-known writers, Butch Thompson moves seamlessly from Morton's ragtime-based syncopations to the right-hand trills and bedrock bass lines of the boogie-woogie pioneers, on to Waller's striding, full-bodied left-hand chords and ornate, cascading arpeggios and back again. In so doing, he perfectly captures the brooding, contemplative subtlety with which Handy, Morton, and Waller approached the blues. His renditions are anything but lifeless museum pieces. Rather, they are the vibrant re-creations of an artist who has fully internalized the lessons of jazz history.