

# Nubs, Fats and Charles Boles

He's worked with B.B., Aretha, Marvin Gaye and Dinah Washington — everywhere from Hastings Street to Las Vegas and Puerto Rico.

by Mark Lipson

CHARLES BOLES IS A HEAVY; few will argue the point. As one of Detroit's topflight jazz pianists, he is among those who have been chosen to play in the Montreux/Detroit Jazz Festival this month. On Labor Day, at the Music Hall, Boles will have a rare opportunity to stretch out musically, without the usual restraints imposed by dinner-club settings.

Because of the paucity of jazz clubs in Detroit, few people are aware of Boles' creative genius, but those who have had the pleasure of hearing him play are fully aware of his talents. Detroit saxophonist Sam Sanders lists Charles Boles as one of the city's world-class musicians. Boles has indeed worked with the best: B. B. King, Aretha Franklin, Dinah Washington and Marvin Gaye.

Boles leans back on his living room sofa, which all but envelops him. A printed silk sport shirt hugs his ample waist and tiny beads of sweat stand out against the blackness of his forehead. A Cable baby grand piano looms over his left shoulder. His voice, as he speaks of his childhood, is all gravel and smoke.

"Now let me tell you about that. When I was a kid, everybody in Black Bottom — especially some of the more loose people — they'd give house-rent parties on the weekends. Okay, now these rent parties were just what they say. They'd serve chicken, and maybe some fish, and booze, and these houses always had an upright piano. The lady downstairs from us used to hire a piano player named Nubs — he'd had his fingers cut off at the first joint. He played boogie-woogie. Every number was boogie-woogie. You could hear the people down there shufflin' and

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movin' their feet around. The walls be shakin', but the music be good. I knew then that I wanted to learn to play piano."

Fats Waller, a frequent guest at the Boles household, recommended that young Charles be given formal piano lessons.

"The reason I really started taking les-



sons and stuff . . . my mother was cousin to Fats Waller's wife and he used to stay at our house when he'd come to town. And I can remember this man comin' in there and playin' the piano. I'd jump up on his knee and play the piano with him. So he told my mother one day. 'This guy wants to play the piano and you should give him lessons.' I always wanted to play the piano. I had no idea who Fats Waller was — he was just a guy who came to my house and played."

During his school years (he attended Northern High School), Charles thrived on a steady diet of jam sessions at pianist Barry Harris' house, along with young virtuosi like Donald Byrd, Roland Hannah, Tommy Flanagan, Paul Chambers,

Yusef Lateef, Sonny Redd, and Charles McPherson — all former Detroiters who have gone on to international acclaim.

From the confines of the Harris flat above a grocery store on Russell Street, Boles moved on to the carnival reality of the Cozy Corner bar on Hastings Street, where raffish characters enjoyed three nightly performances by female impersonators.

"HASTINGS STREET, which is now the Chrysler Freeway, was an unofficial red-light district then. I mean *everything* went on there. In '49, I played my first job on Hastings Street. There was a lot of gamblin' houses. There was a *lot* of prostitution. I'll tell you what, Hastings Street was the street where anything could happen. You could get whatever you wanted there," Boles says, a deep rasping chuckle floating up from his belly. "It was pretty racially mixed too. Anybody could go there and do what they wanted to do, as long as they had money. Hastings Street ran all the way down to Adams, see, and when you got to Adams you were in Paradise Valley." Another hoarse laugh filters up from his chest. "Paradise Valley was the

area where they had the bigger clubs, like the 606 Horseshoe, the Sudan, Club Valley and Sportree's Club. I played up and down Hastings Street for ten years. During the day I was a stock control manager selling typewriter parts. I was lucky if I got ten hours of sleep a *week*. I had a heart attack back in 1959, and that forced me to quit my day job."

Boles' first serious jazz engagement was also in 1959, when he appeared with Sam Sanders' quartet at Detroit's Unstable Lounge in the heady company of such Olympians as Alice McLeod (now Alice Coltrane), bassist Cecil McBee and Kirk Lightsey (now Dexter Gordon's pianist). Boles got his first big break playing in Las Vegas with Della Reese's drummer,

Eagle Eye Shields. Lightsey, who was musical director of the Detroit Playboy Club, introduced him to Damita Jo, with whom he toured in 1967 and 1968.

In 1969, Boles went on the road with blues master B. B. King, traveling through the United States and Europe.

"I remember walking down a street in Germany to see a castle, and there were people running down the street to get my autograph. Blues and jazz are supported more by foreigners than by our own people — that's really sad."

BOLES AND B.B. KING RECORDED *Live and Well at the Village Gate* in 1969. Appearances with King's band on the Merv Griffin and Dick Cavett shows were followed by collaborations with Aretha Franklin, Marvin Gaye, Mary Wells and Little Esther.

Boles has survived the Detroit jazz scene for the past three decades on versatility and endurance. The rich diversity of his music reaches from the anthems and gospels he plays at the Second Baptist Church in Greektown to the classrooms at Oakland University, where he teaches piano technique, improvisation, music theory and composition. His repertoire runs from stride piano and boogie-woogie through the rhythmic and harmonic complexities of bebop to the lush modalities of the post-bop idiom. The freshness and spontaneity of his playing reflect his major influences: Art Tatum, Vladimir Horowitz, McCoy Tyner and Barry Harris. His own compositions represent a radical departure from traditional harmonic movement; they are pure joy and fire. Because his concepts are so technically demanding, sidemen visibly cringe when he pulls out his arrangements. Their apprehension is tempered with serious respect for Boles' music, a respect now shared by a growing audience.

"At this point, I'm receiving the most recognition of my career. More people know me and see my name in the paper. More people tell me that they enjoy my playing — I don't know what to attribute that to. The press has been nice to me. Longevity is a part of it, I guess. I think I'm learning to play the piano too, you see, that's a little bit of it."

Although he's been performing for thirty years, Boles retains the ingenuousness and ebullience of a novice. He is, in fact, still studying intensively — keyboard technique, conducting, and composition — at WSU.

Hearing Boles play is a joy, but watching him perform is a total experience. His sense of humor is as neatly timed as his arpeggios, and he sparkles with personal warmth and style. He can be heard weekdays at the Roman Terrace in Farmington Hills from 4:30 p.m.-7:30 p.m. and at the Gnome, on Woodward near Alexandrine, Thursday nights from 10 p.m. 'til 2 a.m. **D**

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