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Big Maceo Merriweather

Major Merriweather, better known as Big Maceo Merriweather, was born in March 1905 near Newnan, Georgia. He and his family lived on a farm in a small town until moving to Atlanta in 1924 (O'Neal, 2016). However, Merriweather did not stay there long as his family followed the great migration of African Americans to northern cities and became residents of Detroit in 1924. Self-taught in piano, Detroit was where Merriweather's early music career began and developed as he played through different house parties and clubs. Unfortunately, Merriweather did leave Detroit in the 1940s to elevate his musical career as Chicago was the midwestern epicenter of music (O'Neal, 2016). At the time of early blues in Detroit, all those looking for fame and success would eventually move to Chicago to begin recording their work or risk never reaching a higher caliber of fame (African American Registry, 2016). However, for almost two decades, Merriweather was a staple of the Detroit blues scene and performed under the stage name of "Big Maceo."

Big Maceo's piano style has often been characterized through his heavy-handed technique. Interestingly, Big Maceo was left-handed, and his songs brought out stronger, deeper beats because of this strength. The left-handed dominance is a hallmark of his work and is often considered a large part of his success. A pioneer of the urban blues scene, Big Maceo was considered one of the prominent individuals who shaped and influenced the current style of blues. He helped cultivate the genre from the Southern casual feel to a precise urban

sophisticated improvisation that brought greater popularity to the music (All About Blues, n.d.). Moreover, Big Maceo was a strong singer whose voice work in “Worried Life Blues,” a standard in blues music, is exemplary of his many talents. Through his early years in Chicago, Big Maceo would often travel back and forth between there and Detroit as the music industry was swinging low during World War II. However, Big Maceo’s success flourished in Chicago after the war, making Maceo a key player in the blues scene that pioneered new piano techniques and styles for all future blues pianists. While in Chicago, he performed with some of the greatest musicians at that time including Big Bill Broonzy and eventual close friend Tampa Red (All About Blues, n.d.). Sadly, Big Maceo’s career didn’t last long when he suffered a stroke in 1946 that made use of his right hand impossible. Now reliant on hiring pianists to play treble parts or the entire piano accompaniment, Big Maceo’s peak performing talents were cut short. Although he continued to play music to a lesser degree, Big Maceo managed to continue as a mentor for many blues pianists at the time. Sadly, Big Maceo’s life came to a close in early 1953 from a lethal heart attack (O’Neal, 2016). Though he passed away in Chicago, Big Maceo's resting site is in Detroit Memorial Cemetery in Warren, Michigan (Dhal & O’Neal 2018).

Big Maceo’s impact on blues music and its eventual inclusion and influence in rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and jazz was vast and helped define the genre today. However, Big Maceo’s journey from Detroit to Chicago was an almost traditional aspect of a career in music throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Due to a lack of major (and barely any minor) recording studios based in Detroit, artists throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s often ventured to Chicago to record their sound (Detroit Historical Society, n.d.). The exchange of musicians helped cultivate a similar blues style between the two midwestern metropolises. Both cities were urban centers for migrating African Americans from the Mississippi Delta, and both

towns necessitated similar changes in musicianship to facilitate music to larger crowds (Detroit Public TV, n.d.). The two cities led the way with electronic blues, which amplified the noise and welcomed the establishment of bigger bands within blues to create more sound.

Although he passed away in Chicago and spent many of his professional years there, Big Maceo always cared deeply for Detroit and even wrote a song in its honor released in 1947. Entitled “Detroit Jump” on his album *The King of Chicago Blues Piano*, the song pays homage to how much Big Maceo loved the city. Big Maceo continues to be honored to this day, including receiving a posthumous induction into the Blues Hall of Fame (Bman, 2012). Additionally, the 2008 White Lake Blues Festival took place in Whitehall, Michigan and a major goal of the festival was to raise money to give Big Maceo’s unmarked grave a headstone. The fundraising was a success, and Merriweather has had a gravemarker since June of 2008 (Dhal & O’Neal 2018). Although often considered a Chicago blues pianist, Big Maceo was a Detroiter at heart and epitomized the Detroit blues scene of the early twentieth century.

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