

EARL HINES PLAYS COLE PORTER

New World Records 80501

The spring of 1974 marked the tenth anniversary of the rejuvenation of Earl Hines's career. On the night of March 6, 1964, he had walked onstage at New York's Little Theater and told the audience that he was not really giving the first solo concert of his life but merely playing in his living room for his friends. He then proceeded to perform with a brilliance that startled even his most devoted fans in the house, some of whom returned to attend the midnight concert that Hines and his accompanists agreed to add on the spur of the moment, and which was recorded for posterity. And an enterprising record producer set up a studio date for the following afternoon.

Rave reviews in the dailies, weeklies, and the jazz press sustained the momentum, and one of jazz's greatest figures was returned to the limelight where he belonged. Hines, who'd just turned 61, was at the height of his pianistic powers, and though he was a reluctant soloist (he had become leader of his own big band on his twenty-fifth birthday and kept it going for almost twenty years) he allowed this aspect of his talent to flourish. But he also retained his love of showmanship, and consistently made admirers of his piano playing sit through acrobatic drum solos and show tunes by girl singers.

In his heart of hearts, Hines, whether playing solo or heading a quartet, was still at the helm of his big band at Chicago's Grand Terrace, where he was featured from 1928 to 1940. "I played on a white grand piano," he told Whitney Balliett, "and all the lights would go down, except for a spot on me and on each of the chorus girls, who were at tiny white baby grands all around me on the dance floor. When I played, they played with me--selected notes I taught them." Even when he was alone on a bare concert or nightclub stage, Hines's smile was electric, and he seemed larger than life.

And what he could do at the keyboard was as dazzling as those elaborate stage shows. Earl Hines was a wizard of the piano--the man who had created a true jazz vocabulary for his instrument. To be sure, there were great jazz pianists before Hines--James P. Johnson and Jelly Roll Morton, to name two from whom Hines learned much--but they didn't have his audacity, his unfettered imagination and rhythmic daring. Though he himself claimed that his style was already in place when he met and befriended Louis Armstrong in Chicago in the mid-Twenties (the century's and theirs), there can be no doubt that Armstrong's message of freedom made Hines resonate, and their surviving collaborations, especially the duet *Weatherbird*, are among the most remarkable examples of creative interplay in jazz--or anywhere in music.

Like Armstrong, Hines was a true virtuoso, and his approach to improvisation was essentially pianistic--kaleidoscopic, multilinear, and when it came to rhythm, almost acrobatic. His suspensions of the beat can make the listener wonder if he has lost his footing, but inevitably he returns right on the beat, no matter how far he has wandered. For Leonard Feather, Hines was "the Houdini of jazz piano," for his ability to extricate himself from traps of his own devising. For Gunther Schuller, "listening to Hines is like standing at the edge of a precipice in a heady wind," and for Balliett, "he gave the impression of a dancer repeatedly moving toward or receding from the listener, or of distant sounds being bandied about by the wind." And for fellow pianist Dick Wellstood, "his is the music of change, based on the rhythms of the body in a graceful way unique to the older jazz players . . . his is freedom in discipline, infinite choice in a limited sphere, the tension of Will versus Material--his is human creativity."

At times Hines's ceaseless inventions may seem discontinuous, but the logic is always there. And so is the love of sounds--Hines's conception of the piano is, need we say, orchestral. Having heard what others have to say, here are some words, via Whitney Balliett's flawless ear, from Hines himself: "I don't think I *think* when I play. I have a photographic memory for chords, and when I'm playing, the right chords appear in my mind like photographs long before I get to them. This gives me a little time to alter them, to get a little clash or make coloring or get in harmony chords . . . I always challenge myself. I get out in deep water and I always try to get back. But I get hung up. The audience never knows, but that's when I smile the most . . . My mind is going a mile a minute, and it goes even better when I have a good piano and the audience doesn't distract me . . . put everything out of your mind except what you have to do." Perhaps Max Harrison has summed up the Hines style most succinctly, as "relentlessly purposeful complexity."

Hines certainly had a good instrument at his disposal when he came to record the music at hand. It was producer Bill Weilbacher's idea to have Hines do Cole Porter tunes. The pianist had already made several "composer" albums, among them music of Hoagy Carmichael, W. C. Handy, George Gershwin, Duke Ellington, and Harold Arlen. A thorough search of the Hines discography reveals that he'd not recorded a single Porter tune prior to this session--nor did he ever record a Porter tune again. Nevertheless, the combination works well.

Always a quick study, Hines, according to Weilbacher, perused a stack of Porter sheet music the producer had brought to the session, ran through a few, "until he suddenly finds a tune that strikes his mood . . . and begins to seriously work the piece through . . . At first he will do some finger exercises, then he will experiment with different keys, and finally he will work with alternative tempos, coming in the end to rhythmic variations. Then he will play a chorus or two . . . look up, and say . . . with total determination, 'All right, let's see what this sounds like.'"

Cole Porter was one of the most sophisticated and musically well trained of American popular composers from the "Golden Age." He'd studied harmony and counterpoint at Harvard, and later continued his education under Vincent d'Indy in Paris. His ballet score, *Within the Quota*, was premiered in 1923 on the same bill with Milhaud's *Creation du Monde*, and was well received (it was later revised as *Times Past*), but Porter never pursued this path again. And, as Alec Wilder pointed out, Porter's lyrics have sometimes overshadowed his music. But there is plenty of melodic and harmonic meat for an improviser to feast on, and many Porter tunes have become jazz standards.

You Do Something to Me, from the show *Fifty Million Frenchmen* (1929), was later reprised in several films. It remains a favorite of cabaret performers. Hines tackles it at a moderate tempo and displays the melody before breaking up his lines. Trills, roulades, tremolos and broken chords lead to the fifth chorus, where Hines changes the key and offers a bit of stride, then some octave doublings, more stride, melody once again, then melody smothered in pianistic extravagance, and, in the ninth and final chorus, approaching complete freedom. Earl could go out there when he wanted to!

Night and Day, one of Porter's greatest hits, was written for Fred Astaire in *The Gay Divorce* (1932); it also served as the title of the unfortunate 1946 Hollywood biography of the composer (played by Cary Grant). It's highly chromatic and has an unusual structure (for a pop tune): A-B-A'-B-C-B'. Hines, it seems to me, doesn't always follow this scheme. In any case, he trots out all the devices

listed above, again at a moderate tempo. He also offers a relative rarity: a chorus, strongly rhythmic, in strict tempo. The ending is mysterious.

Rosalie, introduced by Nelson Eddy in the eponymous film of 1937, is among Porter's lesser efforts, but lends itself well to Hinesian treatment. He seems to feel at home here, picking a very bright tempo. There are fine riffs in the third chorus, and his right hand goes to town. In the seventh chorus he creates a virtual waterfall, from which the melody peeps out. Then he halves the time and offers an elaborate tag. To this listener, it's the highlight of the set!

I've Got You Under My Skin, from *Born to Dance* (1936), received an Academy Award nomination and was reprised in *Night and Day* by the excellent Ginny Simms. And it has, of course, been immortalized by Frank Sinatra. In beguine tempo, and no less than 56 measures long, it is a rangy tune. Hines likes the melody, presenting it with nice decorative effects. In chorus two, he adds octaves, trills--the works. It becomes a waltz momentarily, and Hines plays cat-and-mouse with the melody, catching it and letting it run away. Then he softens his touch to prepare for a pretty ending.

I Get a Kick Out of You was introduced by Ethel Merman in *Anything Goes* (1934) and is one of Porter's most enduring songs, also thanks to Mr. Sinatra. Wilder calls its melody "self-supporting," and Hines gives it purposeful exposition--pretty straight for Earl! But then come the fireworks: kaleidoscopic effects, a merry-go-round, a whirlpool, a gallop--and then a little surprise. He may never have played this piece before or since, but makes it his own here.

What Is This Thing Called Love was introduced in London in 1929 by Elsie Carlisle and was later heard in several films. It is perhaps the most-used Porter tune in jazz, not least due to its being part of the Charlie Parker-Dizzy Gillespie bebop canon, but also because of its haunting melody and interesting harmonic scheme--the bridge is great to improvise on. Hines gives us a rubato exposition that becomes almost hypnotic, then goes into swing tempo, very relaxed. Some chime effects, increasing intensity, abstraction of the melody, florid runs, and a romantic ending. I wonder if Earl did another take, and what *that* would have been like--he was just getting acquainted.

Easy To Love was introduced by James Stewart (yes, he started as a boy singer), danced to by Eleanor Powell, and reprised by Frances Langford, all in *Born To Dance* (1936). Alec Wilder calls it "a superb piece of flowing, nostalgic writing," and that just about says it. Hines begins out-of-tempo, with many decorative effects, then goes into *moderato* tempo, still hugging the melody. Then comes a rising tide of trills and suspensions, strong bass lines, punchy phrases, octaves, runs all over the keyboard, roulades, a Garner-like passage, then into strictly Hinesian stuff. The theme reappears, and there's a long, strong tag ending. It's so nice one wonders why Hines never played this song again, but like so many jazz artists, regardless of generation, he kept his working repertory to a relative handful of familiar items.

In 1974, Hines recorded more than in any other year, before or since, in New York, Paris, Montreux, Nice, Buenos Aires and New Orleans. No fewer than sixteen LPs resulted--not bad for a man in his seventy-first year of life. The night before he made this Porter record, he gave a solo concert at The New School, which also was recorded (twenty years later, it, too, was reissued on CD).

There wouldn't be another year of such astonishing productivity, but Earl Hines kept on working, touring the globe, until the week before his death at age 79, on April 22, 1983. He was one of the "sacred monsters" who created the vocabulary of jazz--a language that is still flourishing. Whether they know it or not, every pianist who attempts to play jazz is using something created by Earl Hines. And even the earliest solo recordings made by this fertile artist still sound "modern," if that term retains any meaning near the end of the century. Hines endures, and this is a fine representation of his art and craft.

—Dan Morgenstern

Dan Morgenstern *has been director of the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University's Newark campus since 1976. A former editor of Down Beat and other jazz publications, he is the author of Jazz People (Da Capo) and has won six Grammy Awards for Best Album Notes. With David Himmelstein, he produced the 1964 concert series at the Little Theater that sparked Earl Hines's rediscovery.*

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EARL HINES PLAYS COLE PORTER 80501-2

- 1 You Do Something to Me (publ. Warner Bros. Inc.) 7:38
- 2 Night and Day (publ. Warner Bros. Inc.) 9:48
- 3 Rosalie (publ. Warner Bros. Inc.) 4:05
- 4 I've Got You Under My Skin (publ. Chappell & Co., Inc.) 8:11
- 5 I Get a Kick Out of You (publ. Warner Bros. Inc.) 4:10
- 6 What Is This Thing Called Love (publ. Warner Bros. Inc.) 4:59
- 7 Easy to Love (publ. Chappell & Co., Inc.) 7:38

All compositions ASCAP

Earl Hines, piano

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