

Syncopated Times

NIGHTS AT THE TURNTABLE
by Scott Yanow

EARL HINES' "LOST" PERIOD

Earl Hines was one of the greatest jazz pianists of all time. Most biographies on Hines go something like this: In the 1920s he developed into the first "modern" jazz pianist in that he did not strictly state the time by striding with his left-hand all of the time. Instead he took occasional wild death (or time) defying breaks with his left-hand that suspended the beat until he magically found it again. His solo piano recordings were way ahead of his contemporaries as was his innovative playing with Louis Armstrong's Savoy Ballroom Five in 1928. Hines led several fine big bands during 1928-48, a period that was followed by a musically unsatisfying three years as a member of the Louis Armstrong All-Stars (1948-51) that found Hines demoted to the role of a sideman. After a few years of heading short-lived swing combos, Hines settled in Oakland, leading a trad band that was a bit beneath him, playing music from the past. It was not until 1964 when a pair of solo concerts in New York alerted critics to his continued brilliance that he made a comeback. Hines spent his last 19 years (up until his death in 1983) leading a quartet and recording prolifically, often as a solo pianist.

The only problem with this narrative is that it greatly underrates Hines' work in the 1950s. During 1955-59, Hines' San Francisco band usually featured trombonist Jimmy Archey, clarinetist Darnell Howard (a former member of his big band who could play very high notes perfectly in tune), bassist Pops Foster and drummer Earl Watkins plus either Muggsy Spanier (himself a major name) or Marty Marsala on trumpet. Their music was often hard-charging Dixieland performed in exciting fashion. While Hines rarely took solo piano showcases in this context, his solos fit well with the group and he always sounded enthusiastic.

Fortunately many of the band's weekly radio broadcasts from San Francisco's Club Hangover have been preserved and released on records through the years. The two-CD set *Live At Club Hangover 1957* is comprised of five previously unreleased sessions from their weekly Club Hangover broadcasts which had been preserved for decades by the San Francisco Traditional Jazz Foundation. Dating from Apr. 12-May 11, 1957 and including all of the music from those airchecks except two songs left out due to space, these well-recorded performances show just how exciting the Earl Hines Sextet could be. Spanier's solos are always full of urgency and fire, Archey manages to handle the rapid tempos (check him out on a racehorse version of "That's A Plenty") by perfectly placing his notes, and Howard is consistently blazing. As for Earl Hines, he sounds like he is having a ball, whether playing "Tiger Rag" at a ridiculous tempo, reviving "Boogie Woogie On St. Louis Blues" or jamming on "Rosetta," "I Found A New Baby" or "Bill Bailey."

Obviously the short biographies written about Earl Hines were written by those who felt that he should have been playing more modern jazz in New York rather than Dixieland in San Francisco. But evaluating his career purely by the musical quality, the 1950s were a time of relative stability and hot jazz, far from a "lost period."

Live at Club Hangover, San Francisco April-May 1957 (Acrobat Music 3174, 28 selections, TT = 2:20:14)
www.mvdb2b.com.