Pine Top Smith

On December 28, 1928, the height of the Roaring '20s, Clarence “Pine Top” Smith recorded some of his piano music at Vocalion Records in Chicago. The 25-year-old had traveled from his home in Pittsburgh, with his wife and son, only weeks before because his friends had told him he could “make it big” cutting records.1

The first of these tracks changed music like an earthquake. Pine Top’s Boogie Woogie marked the first time the term “Boogie Woogie” was used to refer to this type of music, an up-tempo, eight-to-the-bar syncopated blues that had been a staple in the dance halls and juke joints of Pine Top’s boyhood down South. Boogie Woogie music had evolved from ragtime stylings at the turn of the century but hadn’t yet been named or recorded.

Pine Top came to Pittsburgh in 1920 at age 16 and became a successful traveling entertainer. His wife, Sarah, recalled that when he would come home, he’d tease her by shouting “boogie woogie!” A boogie was a party to help with paying the rent for a tenant facing eviction. “Boogie Woogie” was a term Pine Top invented for the music of these parties, though music historian Giles Oakley noted too that “brothels were called boogie houses, and to ‘pitch a boogie’ could mean to throw a party, or something more sexual, but it was the 1928 recording of Pine Top’s Boogie Woogie by Pine Top Smith that pinned the name to this rough, driving piano style.”2
There's no singing in *Pine Top's Boogie Woogie*, but rather, the musician shouts instructions to dancers. Three of Pine Top's expressions in this song went on to musical fame: 1) "The girl in the red dress" or Pine Top's wife, invoked again four decades later in a popular rhythm and blues song; 2) "Shake it!", adopted not only by Jerry Lee Lewis, but also by Little Richard, James Brown, John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, and many other musicians; 3) "That's what I'm talkin' 'bout," another tagline that swept throughout popular music.

Pine Top recorded seven more tracks, (plus three alternate takes) but in March 1929, he was killed by a stray bullet in a dancehall. He was laid out on the sidewalk, pronounced dead at the hospital, and buried in an unmarked grave in Chicago.

Ten years later, others made Boogie Woogie music an international sensation. Swing bands joined the craze, and the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra even recorded a version of *Pine Top's Boogie Woogie*, which became their all-time bestseller. One reporter commented, "Pine Top's Boogie Woogie launched a fad that swept the world in the 1930s and '40s. The Boogie Woogie craze was the most spectacular revolution in popular music to come along until Elvis Presley's *Blue Suede Shoes*. In many ways, Boogie Woogie is the father of rock and roll."

Sad then, the inventor of the term, and the first popularizer of the music, Clarence "Pine Top" Smith, a Pittsburgher, didn't live to enjoy fame or the flowering of his musical form.

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**Lyrics to Pine Top's Boogie Woogie**

(all spoken)

I want all of you to know.
This is Pine Top's Boogie Woogie!

Now I want everybody dealing just like I tell you.
Now when I say "hold yourself," I want all of you to get ready to stop.
And I say "stop," don't move.
And when I say "get it," I want all of you all to do a Boogie Woogie.

Hold it now!
Stop!
Boogie Woogie!
That's what I'm talkin' about.

Now when I say "hold yourself" this time, I want all of you to ready to stop.
When I say "stop," don't move a peg.
When I say "get it," everybody mess around!

Hold yourself now.
Stop!
Mess around!

That's what I'm talkin' about.
Hey little girl, you standin' there with the red dress on. Stand right up here at this piano where Mr. Pine Top is. That's right, face the audience.

Now when I tell you to "hold yourself," you get ready to stop, you hear? And when I say "stop," don't you move a peg. And when I say "get it," I want you to shake that thing.

Hold yourself now!
Stop!

Shake that thing!
That's what I'm talkin' 'bout!

Now I'm gonna pick the piano.

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1 Much of what's known about Pine Top comes from recollections of his wife a decade after his passing in "I Saw Pinetop Spit Blood and Fall" (Down Beat, Oct. 1 & 15, 1939) by Sharon A. Pease.

2 Charles "Cow Cow" Davenport claimed to have coined the term in 1924 when, hearing Pine Top play, he exclaimed "Boy, look here, you sure have a mean Boogie Woogie," as recounted in the April 15, 1943, issue of Jazz Record. That journal, however, was edited by Art Hodes, promoter of Davenport, making the claim suspect. Also, similar terms such as "Booga-Rooga" already existed, and as stated at <www.nonjohn.com/History-of-BoogieWoogie.htm>


4 The line "Put on your red dress, baby, cause we're goin' out tonight" was used in High Heel Sneakers, the best known hit of blues singer Tommy Tucker, reaching #11 on the US Top 40 chart in 1964. More than 200 others recorded the song, including Jerry Lee Lewis, Sammy Davis Jr., Tom Jones, and The Grateful Dead.

5 Pease's 1939 homage recounts the shooting as being purely accidental, a conclusion supported by the inquest, but there is conflicting information on that event and on Pine Top in general; see Boogie Woogie by Nonjohn referencing William Russell's account in Jazzmen (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1939), edited by Frederick Ramsey, Jr. and Charles Edward Smith, especially chapter 4 "Blues" by E. Simms Campbell and chapter 8 "Boogie Woogie" by William Russell.