'Eh that chappie, lo chicks you latched on to Rosewood Ramble with your music recorded. It's a real gone deal that I'm goin' to wheel so stand by while I pad your skulls.'

The introduction rattled out like a burst of machine-gun fire and followed by Duke Ellington's 'Things Ain't What They Used To Be' was familiar enough to Austin's Black population tuned to KVET through the '50s for their favourite disc jockey. For the next hour or two until signing off with Ellington's 'Deep Blues' Dr. Hep Cat would entertain with R&B records and commercials delivered in the outlandish hep talk of the '40s and early '50s. He might introduce a record with:

'Jackson here's that man again, cool, calm and a solid wig He is laying a frantic scream that will strictly pad your skull. Fall in and dig the happenings' Or if advertising a show he might advise:

'Gators, take a knock down to those blowtops who are upping some real crazy riffs and dropping them on a mellow kick and chappie the way they pull their lay hips our ship that they are from the land of razz-ma-tazz:

Today when ghetto terms have been popularised by the music world and White disc jockeys ape their Black counterparts it's easy to forget that there were pioneers in the art and that the emergence of the Black deejay is a very recent phenomenon. Dr. Hep Cat was such a pioneer. Not only was he the first Black disc jockey in Texas but he may well have been the first in the whole of the USA. His first broadcast was in the '40s although the actual year is in doubt. Probably it was before 1949 and it ran for fifteen years, something of a unique record in the annals of Black broadcasting history. His piano playing was always secondary to his broadcasting career and only an amateur activity according to this modest and genial man. When we learn that both careers were combined with a day job as sports director of an Austin recreation centre, that he published a booklet of his 'hep talk' in 1953 and that for the last twelve years he has been a Minister of the church, unique seems a woefully inadequate word to describe this most fascinating man.

Sitting behind his desk in his office at the Doris Miller Auditorium the chunky figure looks every bit the Blues pianist. But instead of the shouts and laughter of the house-party guests the interview is punctuated by the thud of the basketball on the gym floor outside and the shouts of the young players. There's a natural dignity and a warmth to the man but curiously for one who worked a special kind of magic with the language over the air, in person he seems almost shy: 'Rhythm and Blues, that's what I . . . y'know I can't play nothing but boogie woogies'.

Born Lavada Durst in Austin, Texas, January 9th 1913 he learned to play piano at an early age: 'When I started playing piano Blues and boogie woogies was at an early age - I imagine around twelve years of age and then I started learning in the church house on the piano I could find. I'd slip in the church house early in the mornings and probably late sometimes through the week and just start pounding out tunes and, strange thing, only thing I could find I found out was eightbeat music (laughs) I sorta liked that type of music. Nobody taught me anything about piano - just by air - we called it by ear but it's by air y'know, the things that we heard. So I sorta was a fan of Pete Johnson, Meade Lux Lewis . . . Albert Ammons those the guys I used to hear on the radio y'know and then


sorta it came to me I just liked that music y'know and . . . I had a feeling for it. I liked that type of music and seems like it gets on the inside of me, it works up something, gets something going for me.

I never did play professionally at all—well, what we said in that time of day we had house rent-parties - they call 'em see but it wasn't professionally. But say like on Saturday nights a bunch of us we get together and go to certain houses and they charge ten cents admission and - ah—we play from say seven o'clock to one o'clock in the morning for two dollars or dollar-and-a-half (laughs) or we had a lot of fun in other words see. But that's only as far as I went professionally.

All around Austin - the only thing we would do would probably find a certain place y'know that we play at every Saturday night but there weren't any outstanding ones y'know? We knew it's gonna be a - we call it a Saturday night supper, Saturday night fish fry and that's where we were. One was on North Western down here - it's grown up see, used to be nothing but trees and one or two houses in between that on North Western and a house on East Washington Avenue here . . . and one on say about the 1400 block on East 7th Street and, ah, one down on deep East 7th, what we call' Spanish Town'. That's about the area. We found it were better in the houses - each house had its own little y'know private bars and things y'know and little beer and so forth so we didn't play any of the bars. The bars became popular later on.'

Lavada didn't stray too far from Austin but occasionally he would play out of town: 'I say in the Central Texas area in the small outlying cities like Lockhart, San Marcos and Taylor - and different places like that - but not too far. I haven't been out of the State y'know playing . . . barrelhouse music.

Now and then we'd meet up and jam some and some of the best piano players that I mean way outshine me was at those parties and things. We have one right here in Austin now - he hardly didn't make any records - Robert Shaw. And he and I used to come along together, we play some of the same type of music you see but he was a way better piano player than I - than I consider but see we had different touches. And then Robert can play that' Hattie Green' but I play it different see, but he can play it see, he can play it and he got a lot of music, he can play well.'

In fact Lavada picked up 'Hattie Green' from Shaw 'from observing' and not surprisingly their repertoires were similar: 'Well I played a like in addition to 'Pinetop's Boogie Woogie' and 'Miss Hattie Green' I played the 'Rock Island' and I played the 'Piggly Wiggly Blues' and uhm some innovations of my own, boogie woogie tunes. That's about all. Some mixtures of them all. See you can play one or two Blues tunes - sing a variety of songs to it y'know . . . 'In The Wee Midnight Hours' - I played that tune and . . . course you know with one or two tunes you could play all night, sing different songs to it. Kinda like the country music, got two or three chords but they can sing a whole lot of tunes to it.'

Robert Shaw was probably the best known of the Austin pianists but Durst remembered some of the others: 'Uh let me see - well Boot Walton. He's now, he plays for church - Boot Walton and Baby Dotson's passed—he's gone - and see Black Tank also passed, deceased . . . Black Tank he was from the Houston area but he came here around Austin
—he was a tremendous piano player, he was one of the tops and we called him Black Tank (laughs). Like I say he's passed now. They were older and I was a kinda kid hanging around the bunch y'know. But those are 'bout the ones y'know that I played around with and the only one surviving in this area is Robert Shaw. And he's pretty good. You know Robert Shaw and I are about the last of the barrelhouse piano players . . . around in Texas. There might be some other people we've never heard of. Boot Walton he's still around but he plays at church music y'understand. But he was pretty good in those days, like I said Baby Dotson, Robert Shaw, Black Tank yeah - they were the cream of the crop. Make a piano sound different . . . different keys that a polished piano player couldn't reach! Blues keys y'know - they just caught the sound of a piano box these professional artists can't do. Yeah it's a different thing altogether, yes indeed!

Well a lot of people call it 'barrelhouse music' y'know and I think that's the basics of real good music. Because it has a feeling to it, it has a feeling to it and, uh, certain people well they tried to get away from it. They tried to get away from the original, I say, Black music - but then you've lost something. You've lost something you understand? But now they've got to come back to it when you get your basic good music; that's that boogie woogie and from boogie woogie and I'll say eight-beat music comes all the other music.

Strange thing about it' from music one thing to another and then I got the job as a disc jockey and because I was pretty good at announcing baseball games out at Disch Field . . . and I could talk pretty & fast, I could spit out those words pretty fast.'

'Lamp that kitty with the King Kong physique, I most believe he'll put the whammy on that horse skin' Or after some indifferent play:

'Team B.B.'s manager could stand one more greasing, he's not slick enough. Had two ducks on the pond nobody down and didn't a spike reach the promised land'.

The Hep Cat's announcing proved as popular as his team the Austin Black Senators and brought him to the attention of KVET's owners. 'The powers that be at that time said let's try him as a disc jockey. Strangest thing in that period of time that only thing that a Black man could do at a radio station was clean it up! And they took a terrible chance on getting a Black man to be a disc jockey. It was a White station, that's all they had - that's all we have now here in Austin is White stations except they have recently a Latin station - and you can imagine what a crime it was for these White men to sponsor a Black deejay in the late'40s y'know?

Since then a lot of them are famous people now like I imagine you heard of John Connally - used to be Secretary of Trade? Well he was one of the first owners and J.J. - Jake Pickle. John Connally he was the president of the station then y'see and I imagine well, he's one man who believed that everybody should have the right to pursue their happiness if they had the ability. Of course I evidenced my fear of going on the air then y'know because I told him . . . probably my academic qualifications weren't such that I should be over the air y'know and he said, 'Well if you want a college professor go out to the University and get one!'

It's not hard to guess at the reaction of KVET's White listeners when the Hep Cat first assailed them with:
'If you want to be hip to the tip and bop to to the top
You get some mad threads that just won't stop.'

After the shock had worn off the abusive calls came in.

'I got a lot of phone-calls, 'Are you Black?'. Course they used other words, see the term Black just came into being. Used to be Negro or nigger (laughs) y'know what I mean?'

But Lavada and his backers weathered the storm, 'When I got on the air things just jelled for me. I used a style that caught on pretty quick being one of the first Black disc jockeys I imagine in Texas, in this area and the style I used earned me the name Dr. Hep Cat because I talked different terms like hep cat terms. Now the Hep Cat's Prayer is:

- Now I stash me down to cop a nod
- My mellow frame upon the sod
- If I should cop a drill before the early bright
- I'll lay a spiel on the Head Knock to make everything allright
- With that, fly cat, I'll chill my chat
- And cop a nod like mad

You know terms like that when I'm describing different things that's what caught on y'know (laughs). That's what I'm talking about, sold sponsors and things like that. So consequently people would tune in to hear that jive - y'know like a girl we'd call a 'fine brown frame' . . . if you want to learn something you 'cram your knowledge-box'. Or if somebody gonna die you 'knocking fowl-soupt or' going to the skullorchard' - that's going to the graveyard (laughs). And this type of thing, that type of jive.'

Dr. Hep Cat's liberties with the language kept his sponsors like Grand Prize Beer, RC Hair Pomade and Thunderbird Wine happy as indeed it did his audience which eventually spread well beyond East Austin's Black neighbourhoods. The Hep Cat was keeping pretty busy too— during the day as Athletic Director of the Doris Miller Auditorium and evenings on the air as well as all the natural spin-offs of a disc jockey career, promoting concerts, public appearances and even lecture tours of the local high schools.

He explains:

'I was working here while I was a disc jockey - I had two jobs. See I used, I'd be on, say ten o'clock at night till twelve - probably ten till eleven-thirty. Then I had a Saturday morning show too every Saturday morning. And I found out I could carry the two together pretty well. You'd have a little conflict sometimes because in recreation your hours are not stable. See we stayed open as long as the people were here in the '50s, so there you were. But I'd have to hit that ten o'clock when people expect you to be there. At ten o'clock you must be there! Y'know' cause people when they turn that dial they want to hear the Hep Cat!

Well I went from ten till eleven, then from ten till twelve, then back to ten till eleven-thirty and so forth, it varied. Like I said, it was a thrill and my style, I'd play a record by a certain artist I'd say, 'Tain't no sin to take off your skin and dance around in your bones!'
Ha ha ha. And 'If you jump a cut in the early bright get you a fine brown thing make
everything all right. So knock your stash, cats, fall in the alley and jive like mad'. Oh
y'know you have a whole lot of fun when you get a kick out of doing a job, especially
when you doing something you like.'

Dr. Hep Cat's first record was recorded by Fred Caldwell owner of the Uptown label
and programme director at KVET: 'Well I decided I wanted to try to make a record and
then I had a programme director who made my first records y'understand - on the
assumption that I could probably make something. Course it didn't jell y'know because I
imagine . . . it might could have done better if . . . if I imagine if the person had pursued it
sincerely. If it had had distribution it would have been nice.'

The Peacock record is probably even scarcer than the Uptown considering that the
Houston label did have some distribution facilities. But it probably came too early in the
history of Duke/Peacock Records. 'Well uh I wrote a spiritual song for a group of boys,
Austin boys, called The Bells of Joy. And I wrote a song 'Let's Talk About Jesus' and it
sold over a million copies - but listen, me being ah sorta sanctimonious in a way I didn't
put my name as the writer. See I wrote the lyrics to the song see but I was afraid that
people knowing that I was a Rhythm and Blues disc jockey wouldn't buy it see? But I
was wrong. But I didn't get the money from that see but they sold over a million records,
The Bells of Joy, travelled all over the United States singing that song. I said well those
are my friends I said~well all for one and one for all but they took it all (laughs) . . . but I
dunno I feel that sometimes things will come to you eventually but I missed a whole lot
of money then. Sure did. Then I had an inroad to Peacock Recording Company—I knew
the owner, the president Don Robey and his assistant so it was easy for me to go down
and record this record. I didn't make nothing of that either. I imagine about I believe
fifty dollars recording session but that was all.'

Lavada could only remember the tenor saxophonist, Shake Snyder on the session for
despite the credit the Hep Cat Band it was just a studio group: 'They were studio
musicians - in other words he'd call them up when he had a recording session. They were
probably musicians around the city but I imagine Shake Snyder's pretty well known
around there if he's not dead now. 'Cause he had to have one of those pipes y'know those
asthma pipes whatever it is y'know but he could talk - he could play music, he could
write it while you were playing it, notes and everything. Y'know that's extraordinary. He
was from the Houston area.'

Unusual among Texas pianists Lavada used a powerful boogie bass and on a number like
'Hattie Green' the effect is dramatic. The Uptown version is uptempo beautifully sung and
played while the idiosyncratic 'Hep Cat's Boogie' is a joy with Pinetop's calls translated
into hep-talk with instructions to:

'Knock your statue act
Don't vip or vop'
'Now stash yourself ' and
'Do the bebop'

Truly the cat pulling the elephant teeth was a bonnet flipper!
The Peacock version of 'Hattie Green' is slower and even more solid than the Uptown. The lyrics are very similar and mainly traditional Texas verses, The band are very unobtrusive and this like the reverse is beautifully recorded. 'I Cried Last Night' is an odd Blues-ballad and very reminiscent of a small group '40s Decca recording. There is an extended guitar solo but predictably the most noteworthy feature is the rock-solid piano. Both records are rare examples of the authentic piano Blues recorded at a time when the jump Blues were the sound of the day. Sadly they didn't sell.

Although he had little success with his recording ventures Durst's name was sufficiently known for him to promote groups under the Hep Cat banner and he made many such public appearances: 'When I became a disc jockey I - ah would get me a little band and go around different places see and I wouldn't have to do much, talk a little bit and make an appearance. Just make an appearance and say a few words and let the band play. Well I used to play some with Johnny Simmons, who's passed now. Johnny Simmons was one of the best musicians in this part of the country. He played piano and, oh, he played all types of tunes and anything you could mention really. He had a nice little ole band and that's one of the only ones used to go around, used to play for me a lot. They had guitar, drums and saxophone - let me see - and uh piano and trombone. As a novelty I'd take over the piano y'know and they would kinda back me up see. We had a boy that sing with us some time - his name was Therau Piper - but lot of those fellows—Johnny's dead, Therau Piper's dead but some of those fellows around here now that played in that band. But they still playing. See this Hep Cat and his Band I'd give, they'd take my name for that party y'know but they had their own band. They were pretty good. Like I say it wasn't too much money at that time but we enjoyed it. It's a lot of fun. Well I imagine I done that for two or three years then I settled down to just being a disc jockey and probably going up to the school~ and making little talks and how I got started and so forth and, uh, how to be a disc jockey and what it takes to be a disc jockey and so forth.'

In 1953 Dr. Hep Cat added a further string to his bow when he became an author and published a fourteen-page booklet on his jive talk: 'And I wrote a book too called The Jives Of Dr. Hep Cat - on all my jive y'know. And ff I'd had distribution on that and pictures and things it would have sold. Because Memphis, Tennessee and Alabama, Mississippi - a whole lot of Blacks y'understand that got real soul, feels that soul but it - I didn't have any . . . no money, no nothing to distribute it. 4

And then finally I came down to I had to move out to another field. When it's time to change you know it! Like I say you got to be able to conform to change. I've got a different outlook and different things but I maintain that every good and perfect gift come from the Maker you understand? So that was a gift and so this made me do something else. A lot of times people say when you're called to the Ministry that a lot of them say you heard a voice or something but it's just an inner urge to do something else y'know. Why so many people commit suicide, they can't go any further, you understand they can't conform with change. Y'know how every season how the leaves fall off the trees, how during the winter-time the leaves get shed y'know because it's change. Those of us who can't conform with change we die. See you've got to be able to change.

I don't know a lot of times people ask me would I go back into being a disc jockey again. Well the answer’s’ No. I couldn't do that again'. I've found a real happiness in the Ministry. I'm Associate Minister at the Olivet Baptist Church on the corner St. Bernard
and Cotton, but my home church is Mt. Olive Baptist Church on East 11th Street but I don't have a church of my own.'

Apart from a wistful 'Sometimes I say the disc jockeys came a little too soon', with his church and his work at the recreation centre Lavada is well content: 'I'm still working, enjoying my work y'know helping youngsters, producing some good players. Well we've had some mighty good boys come through here in the person of 'Night Train' Lane . . . and just recently Hollywood Henderson that played for the Dallas Cowboys and a number of boys have come through here . . . and we've had some pretty good baseball boys too. And this is also the home of Willie Wells - he's, well, he's pretty old now but he was one of the foremost Black baseball players, they're trying to put him in the Hall of Fame, see. We've had some pretty good athletes around here.'

And he still plays piano. He doesn't have one at home but there is a piano at the recreation centre: 'I still play it - every now and then I practise up on it y'know. I don't play as many songs as I used to play but some of those that I love I play it because like I said, every good and perfect gift comes from God and I just keep that gift. Use it. But I don't play it in public no more, play it for my own entertainment see and it gives me satisfaction. And after I get a good feeling from it, put it down for a while.'

The questions have dried up and as he looks up from the desk he laugh, 'I think I've talked a hole in your clothes!'. Perhaps we should take a leaf out of Dr. Hep Cat's book to express our appreciation. Dr. Hep Cat you are most monster, righteous, so copasetic, alreet, alroot and like this article, all wrote!

Notes

1 The Uptown titles 'Hattie Green' and 'Hep Cat's Boogie' have just been reissued on 'Down South Blues 1949-1961', African Folk Society LP 3428 (see Review section).

2 There must be some confusion here for The Bells of Joy recorded 'Let's Talk About Jesus' (Peacock 1584) some years after Lavada recorded Peacock 1509. Curiously an earlier Bells of Joy record 'Doing For Jesus' (Peacock 1755) has composer credits to 'Lavada Durst'(according to Doug Seroff) on the 45 rpm at least.

3 This must be the saxophonist listed on a Gatemouth Brown session for Peacock as Wilmer Shakesliner (see Blues Records p. 35).

4 There is a fascinating precedent here for Dan Burley, another rent-party pianist and later editor of New York's Amsterdam News frequently devoted articles to the subject and also published Dan Burley's Original Handbook Of Harlem Jive. Reviewers at the time who doubted if many of the expressions Burley used were known even to the average Harlemite would have been suitably chastened to find them in common currency throughout America's Black ghettos as reported by Durst ten years later in Texas, e.g. Burley's version of the Hep Cat's Prayer is so very close to the one reported here (see Mother Wit From The Laughing Barrel p. 215, ed. Dundes, Prentice Hall, 1973).

Sources 1 Interview with Lavada Durst, Austin, Texas 29th September 1977.
2 The Jives Of Dr. Hep Cat, Lavada Durst, 1953.