

FATS WALLER (1904-1943)

Born a minister's son in New York City, Waller became one of the most popular jazz musicians of all time, recording hundreds of tunes with his band during the 1930s that featured not only his superb piano, but his humorous vocals and playful commentary. Very famous as an entertainer, he was also an influential and much-admired pianist, the ultimate example of the east coast style known as "stride piano."

Waller began studying piano at the age of six, and by his teens was something of a prodigy. He caught the attention of James P. Johnson (1894-1955), often cited as "The Father of Stride Piano," and Johnson became his teacher and mentor. He began his recording career in 1922, became resident theatre organist at New York's Lincoln Theatre, and toured as an accompanist to various acts.

During the 1920s, Waller began his long collaboration with lyricist Andy Razaf, with whom he wrote many of his biggest hits over the years. He worked with his teacher, James P. Johnson, in the show *Keep Shufflin'* beginning in early 1928, and the Johnson-Waller piano duets at the show's intermission were legendary. He also appeared at Carnegie Hall that year in a concert of African-American music organized by the composer, publisher, and musician W.C. Handy.

In late 1932, Waller began a long residency at radio station WLW in Cincinnati, also touring regularly, and by 1934 he had begun his "Fats Waller and his Rhythm" recordings. These records, combined with a CBS radio series that dates from the same period, brought him immense popularity. He toured widely from the mid-1930s on, often traveling with a band, and played residencies in Chicago, Los Angeles, and points between. A European tour in 1938 included highly successful shows in England, where he was also on a very early BBC TV show. Back home, he continued to travel and record, appearing in Hollywood films like "Stormy Weather" and "Hooray for Love," and appeared in solo concert at Carnegie Hall in 1942. His last musical, *Early to Bed*, opened in Boston in 1943.

Many of Fats Waller's compositions have become standards of the jazz repertoire and are still performed today. "Ain't Misbehavin'," "Honeysuckle Rose," "Black and Blue," and many other Waller tunes are still heard everywhere. In addition, his piano style is still studied and emulated by amateurs and professionals around the world, and echoes of his playing can still be heard in the work of contemporary musicians.

- *Butch Thompson*