

“Fats Waller, If You Got to Ask, You Ain’t Got It!”

Dan Morgenstern Grammy Award for Best Album Notes 2006



“Fats is gone now, but to me he’s still here with us. His very good spirit will keep him with us for ages. Right now, anytime someone mentions Fats Waller’s name, why, you can see the grins on all the faces, as if to say, “Yea, yea, yes, yes, Fats is a solid sender, ain’t he?” — Louis Armstrong

More than six decades have passed since Louis Armstrong eulogized his friend shortly after his untimely death at 39, and as always, Satchmo stuck just the right note. As this marvelous collection proves, the joyous spirit of Fats Waller is as alive as ever, to seasoned fans and first-time listeners alike.

Thomas Wright Waller, the seventh of 11 children born to Adaline and Edward Waller, six of whom died in childhood, came into this world on May 21, 1904 in New York City—some sources say in Greenwich Village, others claim Harlem. In any case, the family did live on Waverley place but moved uptown during Tom’s early childhood. His first contact with

a piano came at the age of six, at an upstairs neighbor’s apartment; the instrument fascinated him, and he was soon looking for pianos wherever he could.

His musical mother and an elder brother, Robert, born in 1893, were so impressed with little Tom’s zeal that they persuaded a better-off relative to provide a piano, and lessons were procured; however, Tom had such a good ear that he could replicate most pieces after a single hearing and saw no need to practice his lessons, so formal training ended.

His father, a lay Baptist preacher, now also became involved in his obviously gifted son’s musical activities, enlisting him to participate in his services by playing the harmonium. Edward Waller had hopes that Tom would either become a classical pianist (to that end, he treated him to a concert by Ignace Paderewski, an unforgettable experience) or turn to religion as a career, but the former was an almost impossible pursuit for an African American of Tom’s generation, while the latter did not appeal to his sunny temperament.

He furthered his musical education in public school, where he studied string bass and violin as well as piano and soon became the school orchestra's pianist; among his schoolmates was Edgar Sampson, who became a famous composer-arranger in the Swing Era.

Meanwhile, in spite of his father's objections, teenaged Tom, already affectionately dubbed "Fats" by his friends, had taken to attending the local movie palace, the Lincoln, not so much to see the films as to study the resident pianist, Mazie Mullins, who soon became aware of his frequent front-row presence.

Clearly already a charmer, Fats was soon replacing Miss Mullins when she felt like a break, and he also befriended the theater organist, who performed interludes between films and stage shows and accompanied the latter. A quick study, he learned to master the organ well enough to land his first well-paid musical job, subbing for 10 days for the organist, who had suddenly taken ill, at Miss Mullins' recommendation.

Meanwhile, Fats was also working after school as a delivery boy for a local delicatessen run by the Immerman brothers. When Prohibition arrived, the brothers discovered that selling bootleg liquor was more rewarding than deli, and that Fats' ample body was perfect for covering up the bottled goods. This was most probably the point at which Fats first developed his fateful taste for the grape.

By now, Fats had become a thorn in his father's eye, and their battles subsided only when Adele's health seriously declined. Fats spent as much time as he could by his mother's bedside; she died of a massive stroke in November of 1920. Those close to him in later life said that he never fully recovered from the loss; he was only 16.

His father agreed to let Fats move in with the family of a classmate whose older brother, Russell Brooks, was an accomplished pianist who introduced him to the man who would become his musical mentor. This was the great pianist-composer James P. Johnson, father of stride piano, the style then dominant in Harlem, with such outstanding practitioners as Willie "The Lion" Smith and Luckey Roberts, and acolytes Bill (not yet dubbed Count) Basie and, just a few years later, Duke Ellington. At this point, let us attempt a definition of stride piano, for while Fats would transcend the style, it was the cornerstone of his approach to the piano and his peerless rhythmic prowess.

The best definition of stride by far comes from the gifted pen of a latter-day master of the idiom, Dick Wellstood (1927-87), condensed somewhat for this occasion but retaining Dick's characteristic wit. Having stated his dislike for musical labeling, he says that stride is sort of ragtime, looser than Joplin's classic rag, but sharing its march like structures and oompah bass, but warns against too much emphasis on the latter: "Conventional wisdom has it that striding is largely matter of playing a heavy oompah in the left hand, but conventional wisdom is mistaken, as usual... Stride playing requires a certain characteristic rhythmic articulation [to be found in the work of Eubie Blake Roberts, Johnson, Waller, Smith and Donald Lambert]. The feel of stride is a kind of soft-shoe 12/8 rather than the 8/8 of ragtime, and, although the left hand

plays oompahs, the total feeling is frequently an accented four-beat rather than the two-beat you might expect.”

Drummer Jo Jones, he says, told him that when Basie played stride, he'd play a soft four, but accent the first and third beats, which Dick defines as perfect. “A straight four is too confining; a simple two makes you sea sick. At any rate, the characteristic rhythms of stride are provided by the right hand, not the left. It is possible to play an otherwise impeccable stride bass and ruin it by playing inappropriate right-hand patterns. By pulling and tugging at the rhythms of the left, the right hand provides the swing. Now, if the right hand is to be able to do this, the left hand must be not only quasi-metronomic but also totally in charge. The propulsion must always be in the left hand... it is the crux of a successful stride performance... if the time switches to the right hand...the momentum goes out the window. The left must always be the boss and leave the right free to use whatever vocalized inflections the player desires.” Waller, let us add, is the master of both, and in addition, as Wellstood notes elsewhere, takes care of pedaling with the utmost sophistication. And finally, “to stride is to have patience, not to be in a hurry to get things over with.” No matter how fast, Waller never, never gets sloppy. You won't find a missed or misplaced note in any passage in this set. And you will marvel at the man's command of time.

Perhaps because he missed his mother, Fats got married, to a girl-next-door he'd known for years, when he was not yet 18 and needed his father's consent, gladly given in the hope that this would settle the young man down. Edith Hatchett, soon pregnant, was apparently never very interested in her husband's music and certainly not enamored of nightlife. Thomas Waller, Jr. was born in the spring of 1922, but that very summer, his father took a job in Asbury Park, keeping him from his new family. It soon became evident that the marriage had been a mistake, one for which Fats would pay dearly for the rest of his life, spending time in court and even in alimony jail and never obtaining a divorce.

But his professional life was taking wing. Johnson got him his first piano roll job, and Clarence Williams, the New Orleans-born music publisher, record producer, songwriter, and passable pianist and singer, got him his first record date, both in late 1922. And Johnson had found him a job at Leroy's, a popular Harlem club, replacing no less than the formidable Willie the Lion. His first published composition, “Wild Cat Blues,” was recorded, by a Clarence Williams group featuring the great Sidney Bechet (his recording debut) in 1923, the year he also made his first appearance in a new medium for music, radio.

It was in fact as a radio performer that Fats Waller first became widely known, before he broke through on records. After a pair of piano solos for the Okeh label (1923), he did not record again, under his own name (plenty of accompaniments for singers, and sitting in, unbilled, on Fletcher Henderson band dates) until late 1926, when he made his first trip to Victor's Camden studios, a converted church sporting a first-class pipe organ. The label had signed him at first in the role of pipe organist (as a black counterpart of the hugely successful Jesse Crawford), and the debut was made with the terrific “St. Louis Blues” that kicks off the second CD in this set. “A Sensation!!!,” read the ad copy, “Fats Waller makes this pipe organ ‘croon the blues.’”

More organ solo disks followed, earning Fats jobs in New York and Chicago as featured performer on the grand theater, organs so popular at the time, before the coming of talking pictures. Victor also partnered him with trumpeter Thomas Morris and his Hot Babies, a combo including trombone, guitar, and occasional drum—as Thomas Waller, he got first billing. It was on one of these sides, recorded late in 1927, that Fats' voice was heard for the first time on record (he had most probably been singing on some of his many radio appearances). His scatting on "Red Hot Dan" could not be called a memorable debut and it would be more than three years until his next and much more meaningful shot.

By this time, Fats had met the love of his life, Anita Rutherford, who would bear him two sons, Maurice and Donald, and remain steadfastly at his side until the end. Though Maurice Waller claims that they were married, no evidence of this has been found, and Edith was relentlessly on Fats' tail for alimony; in 1928, he served some three months in jail for non-payment. His lovely eponymous tribute to Anita can be heard on the first disc of this set—it is one of this writer's favorite Waller songs.

As a composer, Fats had 75 published pieces to his credit by the end of 1928. With the exception of "Squeeze Me," which became a 3 A standard, and such gems as "Willow Tree" and "I'm More Than Satisfied," most of these were blues ditties or instrumentals, among the latter several recorded by Louis Armstrong, Fletcher Henderson, King Oliver and other notables. But the best was yet to come as he found his perfect collaborator in Andy Razaf.

Razaf (1895-1973) was a descendant of Madagascan royalty (his full given name was Andrea Menentania Razafinkerifo) who had aspirations as a serious poet and also tried a bit of singing but found his metier as a lyricist. His many partners included Paul Denniker, James P. and J.C. Johnson, and Reginald Foresythe, but it was with Waller that he did his most lasting work. Together, they spawned such evergreens as "Honeysuckle Rose," "Ain't Misbehavin'," "Black And Blue," and "Prisoner Of Love," among many notable collaborations. (Razaf is the subject of Barry Singer's *Black And Blue*, an excellent biography.)

Much of their teamwork was done for shows, often with close deadlines ("Honeysuckle " was completed on the phone). The first was *Load Of Coal*, done for Connie's Inn, by 1928 second only to the Cotton Club among Harlem nightspots, and run by George Immerman, deli and bootleg days behind him. Next came *Keep Shufflin'*, its title derived from Noble Sissie and Eubie Blake's enormously successful *Shuffle Along*, which, in 1921, sparked a decade of black musical hit shows on Broadway. The near-namesake was no hit, in spite of a fine score, and a pit band that sported Fats and James P. on two grand pianos—they were also featured as an act-plus the fine trumpeter Jabbo Smith, and multi-reed -man Garvin Bushell. These four, as the Louisiana Sugar Babes, recorded four sides for Victor, two of which can be enjoyed on this set. The show's backer was the notorious gambler, man-about-town and jazz fan Arnold Rothstein, whose idea it was to have both Johnson and Waller, favorites of his, in the band.

The show's luck ran out after 104 performances, when Rothstein was famously gunned down on the lobby staircase of the swank Park Central Hotel, but during its run Fats made his Carnegie Hall debut, featured in W.C. Handy's ambitious concert celebrating "the Evolution of Negro Music" and the 25th anniversary of the publication of "Memphis Blues." The director of *Keep Shufflin'* refused to let James P., leader of the pit band, appear as soloist in his composition "Yamakraw," a rhapsody for piano and orchestra, but did allow Fats to sub for him. He also concluded the concert with "St. Louis Blues" on the hall's pipe organ, accompanied by full orchestra.

Fats' next Broadway venture was more successful. *Like Load Of Coal*, it began as a Connie's Inn floor show, but it was so good that after some tryouts in the Bronx (New York was loaded with theaters in the 1920s), it opened, as *Connie's Hot Chocolates*, on June 29, 1929. In the pit band was a trumpeter named Louis Armstrong, featured on the show's plug song, "Ain't Misbehavin'," as an *entre'act*, unbilled but singled out by more than one reviewer (New York was loaded with newspapers), so soon moved up on stage and named in the program, also joining Fats and female lead Edith Wilson in a trio listed as "A Thousand Pounds of Rhythm." (Louis was in a chubby phase and Miss Wilson was pleasingly plump.)

In the *New York Post* of June 18, 1929, there was an interview with Fats that might well be the first such feature on a black jazz musician in an important white newspaper. He was described as "one of the leading lights in the field of Negro popular music," and "when *Connie's Hot Chocolates* comes to the Hudson Theater next week, Waller makes his formal bow to a Broadway that has already heard much of his music." The article, interestingly, mentions the practice of black songwriters "selling songs to white songwriters, who would vary them slightly and re-sell them as their own." Waller said that the average rate for such a transaction was \$250 (a good deal of money in 1929), and the article states that one Waller song became "the best seller of its season and netted \$17,500 to its 'composer,' who paid Fats \$500 for it."

Alas, always in need of alimony funds, Fats did not learn his lesson: later that year, he sold outright to publisher Irving Mills his rights to all his Hot Chocolates songs; at least his name remained on the credits. In the Post piece, Fats noted that he'd made no attempt to break rules or vary the standard formula for the show's score, and throughout the rest of his life, he seldom departed from it, except in his compositions for piano, and instrumental pieces such as the splendid "Jitterbug Waltz" (heard on this set's second CD).

His facility was legendary; the story goes that he once, when broke and very hungry, traded Fletcher Henderson nine instrumentals for hamburgers. How many the story doesn't say, but Fats' appetite was enormous—trustworthy eyewitnesses report that he could put away two roast chickens with all the trimmings at one sitting. Nevertheless, it's certain that Henderson got a bargain. Fats washed down his "snacks" with awesome quantities of hard liquor. Gin and scotch appear to have been his favorites—fond of the latter beverage upon awakening, he dubbed scotch "my liquid ham and eggs." We may smile at such comments, and Fats could always hold his liquor, but what he was doing to himself is no laughing matter.

Fats' Victor contract had been renewed, and he was now switching from organ to piano solos, mostly of his own compositions, but also presiding over some band sessions, issued as "Fats Waller and his Buddies " and notable for their integrated personnel. They give us a snapshot of the friendly relations between black and white jazzmen in the Harlem of the late 1920s; Jack Teagarden and Eddie Condon were among the participants who would remain lifelong friends. But, perhaps due to the stock market crash, phase one of Fats' relationship with what by now had become RCA Victor ended with a pair of early 1930 piano duets, with Cab Calloway's Bennie Payne.

But now radio would become the main Waller medium. He had caught the attention of the young daughter of William S. Paley, head of the CBS network, at a party hosted by George Gershwin (a great admirer of Johnson, with whom he had shared song-plugging duties in the 'teens, Smith, Waller, and later, Art Tatum), who pulled her dad's coat. Fats was soon heard three times weekly over WABC, then the network's flagship station (cq—CBS and ABC were not yet separate). Originally scheduled for 15 minutes at noon for 13 weeks, after four weeks this was expanded to half an hour, with an additional 13 weeks added. If not otherwise engaged, Fats would spend many a night at Connie's Inn, where an elegant white Estey organ had been installed especially for him.

In early 1931, he was back in the recording studios, this time for Columbia (not yet acquired by CBS), guesting with the very popular Ted Lewis band (including, for the occasion, a young clarinetist named Benny Goodman). This marked Fats' true debut as a vocalist; he sang and played the piano on three numbers, including his own brand-new "I'm Crazy 'Bout My Baby." A week later, on his own, he sang and played on this same piece and another, issued as Thomas "Fats" Waller and his Hot Piano. But for the time being, this was but a straw in the wind; nor did his cute vocal banter with the leader on an obscure Jack Teagarden session (hear a sample on "You Rascal You," leading off Disc Three) attract much attention in the any case greatly depressed record marketplace.

In the summer of 1932, Fats decided it was time for a vacation, and with his friend and fellow songwriter Spencer Williams, boarded the liner *Isle de France* for his first visit to Europe. By all accounts he had a good time in Paris, hanging out with the many expatriate performers there, but he returned sooner than planned, skipping a visit to London.

Back home, he signed a management contract with Phil Ponce, his first full-time agent, who soon showed his mettle. Ponce arranged for a guest spot for Fats on Cincinnati's powerful clear-channel station WLW, and it went over so well that he had no trouble landing his client a show of his own. Called Fats Waller's Rhythm Club, it was on the air at least twice a week, featured Fats with a studio band (white), a vocal group, and guests, including a local discovery of his, teenaged pianist singer Una Mae Carlisle (she can be heard with Fats, in a 1939 reunion, on CD 3, cut 19).

The show was such a hit, especially in the Midwest, that Fats was booked with a band of his own for a 16-week tour on the RKO theater circuit; made up of local musicians, the band's most

notable member was trombonist Vic Dickenson. Rhythm Club broadcasts were made from studio facilities along the tour stops. An early *Variety* review of the series noted that “from the way he’s started off here, his radio rep as a piano and song entertainer will soon overshadow his renown [as a composer].” It also mentioned, and quoted, the verbal asides that would become so characteristic of his recordings.

In addition to the Rhythm Club, Fats was active on WLW’s airwaves in a very different role. The station had a big Wurlitzer organ, featured on *Moon River*, a late-night program consisting of romantic classical and semi-classical chestnuts. The organists were unbilled, and only insiders knew that Fats was often at the keyboard, enjoying himself greatly, and slipping in only a few Wallerisms.

Fats left WLW in early 1934 and was soon heard again on New York radio, at times with the Rhythm Club tag, and indeed radio would remain a mainstay of his career, but now something was about to happen that had a profound impact on his life-and on posterity. Radio, after all, is ephemeral (airchecks to the contrary notwithstanding). But records are permanent, and Waller’s hitherto rather casual relationship with the phonograph now turned into an enormously productive and lasting union.

Ponce had approached RCA Victor about resuming the label’s relationship with his client, and recording supervisor Eli Oberstein (the title A&R man had yet to be invented) responded positively, suggesting a small group format. When Fats, just five days shy of his 30th birthday, entered Victor’s Studio 2 in Manhattan, with five newly recruited musicians in tow, neither he, nor Ponce, nor Oberstein could have known that they were about to embark on one of the most productive and longest-running enterprises in the annals of recorded popular music.

Henceforth known as Fats Waller and His Rhythm (a name no doubt inspired by the radio show), the sextet, with a surprisingly stable (and sometimes augmented) cast, made hundreds of records over the next eight years, many of them substantial hits, catapulting our hero to international fame. We will have more to say about the Rhythm presently; it was by no means just a studio band, for Waller did a great deal of touring, and as noted above, sometimes with augmented personnel-after all, this was the Swing Era, and big bands were in vogue. There are several examples from various stages in this collection; excepting the 1940s editions, they usually managed to lose money.

Fats of course also continued to work as a single, and this included his two appearances in Hollywood feature films during the 1930s, both in 1935. First came *Hooray For Love*, in which he more or less steals the scene he’s in from the redoubtable Bojangles Robinson and the gifted dancer, Jeni Le Gon. She’s being evicted, Bojangles is the mayor, and Waller a moving man-of course there’s a piano on the sidewalk, on which he plays (and sings) “I’m Living In A Great Big Way” (these were Depression days, folks).

On screen, even with the inevitable synchronization (not very well done), Fats was a natural-as photogenic as he was phonogenic—and one of course wishes for more. But there was even less

in his next outing, *King Of Burlesque*, in which, aside from some brief stuff as an elevator operator in a department store, he is seen, elegantly attired in white tie and tails, performing “I’ve Got My Fingers Crossed” with a small band. During both these West Coast forays, Fats was featured at Frank Sebastian’s Cotton Club in Culver City, where he had first performed in 1932. The club was frequented by the movie colony, with whom Fats was very popular. Anita came along on the second 1935 trip.

Meanwhile, Fats and the Rhythm, in May, had waxed what would become their biggest hit record—and it wasn’t even a Waller composition, nor a particularly inspired Tin Pan Alley opus. But for some reason, Fats’ ultra-relaxed keyboard tickling and singing (quite straight for him) on “I’m Gonna Sit Right Down And Write Myself A Letter” struck a chord with the public, and Fats’ recording schedule picked up. (The record industry was also beginning to recover from the effects of the Depression; the nadir was 1932.)

Between recording dates, touring was pretty constant, and would include ballroom and nightclub as well as theater dates. The stage shows presented at first-run movie theaters had by the mid-1930s pretty well replaced vaudeville; in fact, may be seen as the final vestiges of the genre. For an economically stressed public, these shows, usually featuring a singer, a comic, dance act and big band (saddled with accompanying all the performers), plus a feature film, cartoon, newsreel and one or two shorts (travelogues and comedies, mostly) were a marvelous bargain, especially before the evening hours—a far cry from today’s inflated theater prices. Fats was a surefire hit, garnering new fans wherever he went, and also becoming a favorite with local musicians, black and white, for he loved to sit in. Those close to the man agree, in the main, that he did not like to be alone, not even in his hotel room, which often became the scene of partying into the wee small hours. Generous to a fault in spite of his constant alimony responsibilities and not infrequent debts, he would pick up the tab—his liquor bills alone would make heavy wallet inroads. But these social activities also led to many tunes; Fats continued to be productive in this realm, and his credited pieces alone number more than 400.

He and Anita and their two sons were now making their home in Queens, and in May 1937, portions of a very special house party were captured by a recording device. Among those present were James P. Johnson, Eubie Blake, Willie the Lion, Andy Razaf, Fats’ sister Naomi, and Rhythm stalwart Gene Sedric. The sound quality is poor, but it is a precious memento of good times past. (It remains officially unissued.)

In early 1938, failing health caused Phil Ponce to retire and Fats’ new manager, who had been supervising quite a few of the Rhythm dates and gotten to know his future client well, was from now on Ed Kirkeby, seasoned music business veteran, founder-manager of the California Ramblers, one of the previous decade’s busiest recording bands (it also performed live on occasion), songwriter, publicist, and, like Irving Mills, another music man of many parts, self-appointed vocalist on many a Ramblers disk.

Kirkeby was genuinely fond of Fats, greatly admired his talent, and did his best to cope with his client’s around-the-clock appetites. Martin Block, quite probably the first disc jockey, also loved

to stage live jazz events for his broadcasts, and recalled the first such involving Fats, on a Sunday morning in April at New York's Criterion Theater. Showtime was 11, but when Block arrived at 9, he found Fats already there, waiting at the stage door, explaining that his train had just come in and that he thought he'd "come over here and mix things up a bit. By the way, where can I get a drink?" In 1938, Sunday morning in most cities was bone dry, and Block said it wouldn't be possible. "Nothing is impossible," Fats responded. "You must have a friend who can come up with some liquid ham and eggs!" Block indeed did, and soon a bottle of White Horse scotch appeared. To Block's amazement, Fats consumed the fifth straight down, not even stopping to catch his breath. Moreover, when they were about to go on the air, Fats felt a need for further "lubricating," if possible, a bottle of sauterne. This, too, was found, and according to Block, Fats "never performed better than he did that Sunday morning."

There would be another notable Block broadcast, that one preserved, but in between, Kirkeby arranged for Fats' second visit to Europe, this time a working one. Very good at publicity, Kirkeby got lots of advance press notice for the opening British leg of the tour, which also included Scandinavia. Fats, Anita and Kirkeby arrived on July 29, docking near Glasgow, where they were greeted by a band of local jazzmen. A few days of sightseeing preceded the August 1 opening at the Glasgow Empire, including a visit to Loch Lomond that prompted Fats' inclusion of the eponymous song in his program for the tour.

Fats took ten curtain calls after the last of his 10 Glasgow appearances, and that set the tone for the rest of the British tour—not one of concerts, but star turns in vaudeville, still very much of a draw in European cities. At London's Palladium, Fats was held over for an additional week. Recording sessions (for HMV, RCA Victor's British affiliate) were quickly arranged, one featuring him at the organ in a program of spirituals. There was also a relay broadcast to the U.S.

The next stop was Copenhagen, where the first two concerts, on September 13, had quickly sold out. (In Denmark, Norway and Sweden, Fats played concert halls, performing as a solo act, usually preceded by a local jazz group which he would join for one number. Most notable among the locals was the great Danish violinist Svend Asmussen, who celebrated his 90th birthday in 2006 and still recalls Fats fondly.) There were two more Copenhagen concerts before taking off for Norway and then Sweden. The reception was warm in both countries, but it was Copenhagen that got the most of Fats, who finished off the Scandinavian tour with no less than three concerts on a Sunday.

In retrospect, it was probably one of these that I attended, about a month shy of my ninth birthday. The concert hall was but half a block from where my mother and I then lived, having arrived in Denmark as refugees from Austria not long before. My mother wasn't exactly a jazz fan, but she no doubt read some of the many press items about Fats and decided that he was someone a young boy might enjoy. Needless to say, she was right. I had never seen anyone remotely resembling this huge, genial black man, who, as I recall, appeared on stage in white tie and tails (tuxedo after intermission) and a top hat, took a bow, placed the hat on the grand piano, and proceeded to play and sing and talk to the audience. I only knew a few words of English, but whatever this mountain of a man with the big smile and mobile eyebrows was

servicing up required no translation, and the rhythm that emanated from his playing, singing, and physicality soon had me moving with him. Other than some random phonograph records (I loved playing records, more than struggling with a violin), Fats Waller was my introduction to jazz. It would be hard to imagine a better one.

In Copenhagen, Fats was asked by a journalist when jazz would disappear. “Never!” was his response. “It’s ridiculous when people say that jazz is a passing phenomenon—it has only just begun.” He also expressed his love for classical music (“My greatest joy is to play a fugue by Bach on the organ”), and dismissed symphonic jazz as “nonsense.”

The tour ended back in England, most notably with Fats’ television debut. The BBC was conducting some experimental broadcasts in the new medium, for which Fats was a natural, as some marvelous photos of his mugging for the camera bear out. The day after, October 1, he was once again on the *lie de France*, headed for home and a long engagement at 52nd Street’s Yacht Club. But first, of course, a record date, which produced, among other gems, “Two Sleepy People,” to be found on this set.

Some two-and-a-half months on Swing Street must have been pleasurable indeed for Fats and the Rhythm guys; they all made their home in New York, and this was the longest road-free stretch in their years together. The many surviving airchecks from the Yacht Club find Fats and band in good humor, and an instrumental, “Yacht Club Swing,” commemorates the gig. But all good things must come to an end.

However, Kirkeby had another transatlantic venture up his sleeve; Britain wanted more Fats, and on March 12, 1939, this time aboard the *Queen Mary*, the big man was on the high seas once more. Though confined to the British Isles, this was a long trip, lasting until, once again on the good old *Ile de France*, Fats docked in New York on June 20; according to Kirkeby, it could have been even longer, but war seemed increasingly likely, and caution prevailed.

On this visit, there was more opportunity for interaction with the local jazz scene, and after a strenuous start (co-billed with the Mills Brothers and doubling between two London theaters), highlights included a swing concert involving yet another Una Mae Carlisle reunion, and a young pianist (and Waller fan) named George Shearing, followed by a jam session at the Nest, a hangout for London jazzers, that lasted until dawn, and Fats spontaneously sitting in with the fine trumpeter Nat Gonella’s little band for a “Honeysuckle Rose” that lasted nearly an hour—and for which Fats was fined 50 pounds by the management of the theater he was appearing at.

The most lasting and valuable memento of this tour, however, was the “London Suite,” the six parts of which celebrated the composer’s impressions of various neighborhoods of a city he’d come to know quite well. Not issued until a dozen years later, the suite, composed on the spot in a recording studio, is a wonderful example of Fats’ creativity, and proof of the saying that music just poured from him. On the same occasion, he also tossed off a sweet little number called “A Cottage In The Rain.”

On the eve of his departure, the Melody Maker, Britain's leading popular music publication, gave Fats this parting salute: "One of the most brilliant true jazz artists ever to come from America to Britain, he returns a more popular idol than ever, and will long be remembered with great affection." That the parting would be final neither writer nor recipient could have known.

Eight days after his return, Fats was back in the RCA studios; the session's output included his tribute to Anita, who had not made this trip.

From here on in, Fats, now at the height of his popularity on records, radio and live engagements, kept up a pace that gave him little time to rest. In addition to headlining at theaters (he was a favorite at Harlem's Apollo, but also downtown at Loew's State and at other movie palaces throughout the country), he frequently toured with the Rhythm expanded to big-band size (after all, this was the peak of the Swing Era).

These tours could be strenuous; like Joe Glaser with Louis Armstrong, Kirkeby was disinclined to turn down any booking offers for his star. The trumpeter Franc Williams recalled a coast-to-coast tour that took the band from New York to Virginia, the Carolinas, West Virginia, Ohio and Michigan for a string of one-nighters, by bus; then by rail to St. Louis, then down to Mississippi (where Eudora Welty may have caught them, Fats inspiring her short story, *Powerhouse*), then Oklahoma, on to Texas and New Mexico, back to Texas, where, in El Paso, at least they had two days in a row, then Phoenix, Arizona, where it was hot enough to literally fry eggs on the sidewalk and too hot for dancing, with the promoter losing his shirt; then a 400-mile bus trip to San Diego, and finally to Los Angeles, and a blessed two weeks at the Paramount. Then north to the Bay Area and more one-nighters, an overnight hop to Salt Lake City, then Denver, and Kansas City, where, arriving exhausted, they found their gig had been cancelled. Fats discovered that Count Basie was in town, took off to find him for "a little drink together," got homesick, and was found by Kirkeby just as he was about to board a train for New York. But since the final tour dates had been booked by the promoter who burned them in Kansas City and had provided no deposits, Fats got the green light, and the band headed back by bus. To Williams, a veteran of many bands, this was the toughest tour of his career; on one leg out West, they went as far as possible by bus, then switched to individual cars, and finally proceeded on horseback-instruments and all. When they finally reached L.A., Fats, who always looked out for his men, took the whole band to a favorite establishment of his, announcing that food, drink, and female companionship were all on him.

But there were respites, if not rests: At the end of 1940, Fats and the Rhythm spent six relaxed weeks at what would become a favorite venue, the Panther Room at Chicago's Hotel Sherman, which also had a national NBC radio wire over which they were heard as many as four times weekly. Fats commemorated this stay with a tune, "Pantin' At The Panther Room." He had a Hammond organ installed in his room and often entertained after the last set; when there were knocks on his door, it wasn't complaints about noise, but requests for favorite tunes.

Early in 1941, some dates were cancelled while Fats had a thorough medical checkup, but he was soon off again with the big band, this time on a six-week Southern tour, again mostly one-nighters. For posterity, one of the year's highlights was the day, September 26, when Fats, the Rhythm, vocalists Myra Johnson and Vivian Brown, and a line of chorus girls gathered in a New York film studio to shoot (and then overdub) four short films, known as Soundies, since they were made to be projected in coin-operated machines featured in penny arcades and such. Happily, all four survive, beefing up Fats' slender filmography.

Fats had already been active in benefits for the British war effort; after Pearl Harbor, he devoted as much time and effort as possible to entertaining the troops, promoting War Bonds, and other patriotic efforts. Early in 1942, Fats, this time without the Rhythm, was featured in his own concert at Carnegie Hall. The January 14 event was the brainchild of old friend Eddie Condon and jazz fan-promoter Ernie Anderson, an advertising man by trade. Well publicized and attended, the concert was not a critical success. Uncharacteristically nervous, Fats indulged in a bit too much liquid ham and eggs (not an easy feat), and since so large a portion of the program was devoted to solo piano, he was too well exposed; one wag reported that almost everything he played sounded like variations on "Summertime," which was actually one of the programmed pieces. A surviving sound bite, a blues on which Fats was joined by the great trumpeter-singer Hot Lips Page, was a highlight of a night Fats soon put behind him with another happy stay at the Panther Room.

More touring with the big band and the two final recording sessions for Bluebird before the Musicians' Union-imposed recording ban (actually, Fats' very last effort for RCA Victor came on the day prior to the ban, July 30, when he contributed a vocal on "That's What The Well-Dressed Man In Harlem Will Wear" to an album of Irving Berlin's show *This Is The Army*), marked another busy year. It included a very successful Canadian visit, and a social encounter in Minneapolis that gave him great pleasure. This was a long lunch with the conductor of the local symphony, the not yet quite famous but already recognized Dimitri Mitropolous, which apparently concluded with some spontaneous piano duets on Bach Inventions and Fugues; Bach was of course one of Fats' great loves. According to a press report, Fats' earnings for the previous year were \$72,000—then the equivalent of the President's salary.

The first month of the big man's final year found him in Hollywood for the filming of *Stormy Weather*, starring Lena Horne and Bill Robinson, with choreography by Katherine Dunham—the second all-black feature of 1943. (The other was *Cabin In The Sky*, also with Lena Horne.) Fats was not heavily featured, but got off a marvelous "Ain't Misbehavin'," unloaded a few verbal zingers, and easily stole every scene he was in. He appeared on screen with an ad-hoc group, having disbanded the Rhythm after a final Chicago engagement. From now on, Fats Waller would be a single attraction.

Broadway also beckoned. Initially, Kirkeby had been in negotiation with actor-producer Richard Kollmar about a part for his client in a show set in Martinique called *Early To Bed*, but when plans for the score went awry, Fats' role changed to composer. His legendary facility intact, he

came up with music as soon as lyricist George Marion delivered the words. He also headlined at his beloved Apollo, and, score completed, singled at Philadelphia's Celebrity Bar.

Early To Bed began tryouts in Boston in late May, with Fats on hand. While he was cheered, feted and interviewed, the hotel where he had been booked refused to honor his reservation, and in spite of efforts by friends at other decent venues, had to spend the night in a flophouse. The show opened a few weeks later to lukewarm reviews, but the songs and production values were praised, and *Early To Bed* racked up a respectable 382 performances. That this would have led to good things for Fats is obvious, but he was long gone when it closed.

Friends and colleagues and family (his two sons now old enough to sometimes travel with him) had long been concerned about Fats' health, but he did not adjust his intake of food and drink, or try to get more rest. A three-week stand at the Greenwich Village Inn was to be the last in his hometown; it included visits from Art Tatum (they had a mutual admiration society) and old friend Pee Wee Russell, sitting in on a borrowed clarinet. And there was time out for a final record date—a long one—for V Discs, the project for Armed Forces-only consumption permitted by the Musicians' Union. It was a fine swan song, including the best numbers from *Early To Bed*.

Fats and Kirkeby now left for a long booking at a Hollywood club, with a two-week Omaha stopover. This was a big Army town, and there was many a special performance for the boys in uniform, who responded with great warmth. Less can be said for the first-class hotel at which Kirkeby had made sure they would be housed; they had rooms, but were denied both dining room access and room service!

That Fats was wined and dined by the Army, Air Force and Chamber of Commerce was an ironic footnote; one wonders if Kirkeby, who indignantly recalled this ugly piece of prejudice years later, did enough to publicize it then and there.

In Hollywood, there were no such problems, but while the club did provide the contracted-for Steinway grand (Fats had said, "Let's go home!" after a run over the resident piano's keyboard), the room was air-conditioned, with ventilators both above and behind the piano. Fats did not mention this; the cooling effect seemed to please him. But into the second week, he came down with the flu. Refusing hospitalization, he was attended by two doctors at his hotel, who after ten days of rest let him return to finish out his contract, warning him to take it easy. But he wouldn't—or rather, couldn't. First off, he honored a postponed benefit for "Colored U.S.A.," then appeared on a series of top radio shows, and topped this off with a freebee for Hollywood Canteen.

On his penultimate night at the club, he was presented with cases of scotch and champagne which came in handy for a farewell party at Benny Carter's home, that went on past dawn. Fats was due for a press party later that day. He showed up early, played a bit of piano, but could hardly keep his eyes open, eventually grabbing some pillows from a divan and falling fast asleep. With apologies, Kirkeby had him delivered to the hotel; Fats managed to show up only a half hour late for his closing night. Fearful that well-wishers would corral Fats, Kirkeby whisked

him out via the kitchen; there was a train to catch in the morning, and both men were looking forward to spending Christmas at home with their families.

Once on board, Kirkeby wrote, Fats said he could not take this much longer, and was assured that there would now be enough coming in from record royalties, shows, concerts and ASCAP payments to slow down the pace. But once they got to the club car, Fats was spotted by fans, and another party was on, winding up in their room and ending only when Kirkeby started to undress. Fats spent the entire following day asleep, the manager checking on him from time to time and keeping their new friends from disturbing him by passing time with them.

Past midnight, Kirkeby opened the sleeper door and felt a blast of cold air. There was a blizzard howling through the Kansas plains. "Hawkins sure is blowing out there tonight," Fats said, a comment interpreted by Kirkeby as referring "to the blustery sax playing of his friend Coleman Hawkins. " I've always considered this a sad footnote to the relationship between these two men. Kirkeby no doubt was devoted to his client (and meal ticket), but one must wonder how much else went over his head.

Some three hours later, choking sounds from Fats' bed awakened the manager. Fats was trembling and failed to respond to Kirkeby's calls and shakes. The train had stopped in Kansas City and a doctor, who had been called to another passenger, was found. After careful checking for vital signs, he pronounced Thomas Waller dead. An autopsy found bronchial pneumonia to be the cause. The date was December 15, 1943. He was five months shy of his 40th birthday. Held at Harlem's famed Abyssinian Baptist Church on December 20, the funeral was a major event. The church was packed and thousands gathered outside. Pallbearers included James P. Johnson, Andy Razaf, Clarence Williams, Claude Hopkins, Don Redman and Andy Kirk. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. noted in his tribute that Fats was "a soul touched with the genius of music which brought relief from cares and woes," as it indeed continues to bring.

How The Rhythm Was Born

With characteristic panache, Fats waited until just a few days before he was due to report at RCA Victor's Studio 2 in Manhattan with five musicians to round up a likely bunch of players. The only musician he definitely had in mind was, 19-year-old Al Casey, a guitarist who had been babysitting Fats' sons and was the nephew of the Southern Suns, a vocal group that had appeared on his WLW shows. But that was an Ohio connection, and he'd been away from New York for a while. So now he decided to visit Small's Paradise, a favorite Harlem hangout where Charlie Johnson's band was in residence, to scout out some prospects.

The first man Fats spotted was trumpeter Herman Autrey, who was doing something unusual during a set break. He had remained on the bandstand to check out his section mates' parts on some new arrangements, moving from chair to chair and humming the parts to himself. This impressed Fats, as he later let Autrey know. He also noted the bass playing of Billy Taylor, and no wonder; soon to join Duke Ellington, this man was one of the very best on the instrument.

Drummer Harry Dial seemed to be a good reader—he was playing in a show at Small’s—a rarity among the day’s percussionists.

That left a reedman, and Fats’ pick was the band’s lead alto, doubling clarinet. He had a good tone and Fats probably picked him because lead players tended to be reliable and accomplished; he didn’t seem to mind that Ben Whitted was terribly nearsighted, and according to Autrey, wore such thick glasses that he looked like Cyclops.

This cast was formally rounded up by Fats’ friend Bud Allen and gathered at the pianist’s apartment. In Dial’s autobiography, he recalls this first meeting as the only rehearsal during his tenure with Fats, but Autrey, in a 1975 interview (with John S. Wilson), could not remember any rehearsal at all, and since the planned record date would be his first, one imagines he would have. What he did remember was a friendly get-together and it seems likely that Fats just wanted to talk things through and acquaint himself with his sidemen-to-be. Thus the stage was set for one of the longest-lasting groups in jazz history, if with only two from the original cast, Autrey and Casey, in from start to finish.

Autrey gives us first-hand insight into the methodology Fats devised for the Rhythm, but let us note that the leader had an innate sense of time and timing, and knew exactly how to parse a three-minute (plus or minus; limit around 3:25) performance, rationing out ensembles, solos, vocals—and those unique exhortations, exclamations and verbal codas—in flawless proportion.

Autrey: “He’d play something...he’d say, ‘Alright, Herman—you come in and do this, play the first sixteen, or the second eight, and Gene (Sedric), you do this and that; we’ll try that.’ We try it, and ah, pretty good! We do it again, and the engineer says, ‘That’s good, give us another one.’ No, we didn’t know what numbers we were going to do. They (the recording directors) come up and hand them out to Fats. He puts the music on the piano—first time he’s seen it—and then he passes out a lead sheet to each of us, or chords, maybe, and sometimes, parts from a stock arrangement. With those, sometimes Fats would hit the ceiling when we started to run through them...Bring me that bass part! That’s lousy! Then he’d change the notes, and it would be beautiful because we had the right notes, the right chords. And he knew. Believe me when I say he knew. He wasn’t guessing. He knew!!”

Sometimes, of course, the tunes would not be unknown to Fats, being from his own pen, newly minted or earlier vintage. And there might be a standard or two, and some non-evergreen oldies as well. And by no means all the Tin Pan Alley products were inferior, but even when they handed him a dog, Fats would know how to make its tail wag. (In this collection, outright dogs have been avoided, needless to say.)

He also knew when it came to musicians. Whitted only lasted for that first session, being a weak improviser, but his replacement, Gene Sedric, would become a permanent member, absent only from time to time. (Until the Rhythm became a working as well as recording unit, there might be intervening jobs.)

Most changeable was the rhythm section, but that was perhaps of the least consequence, since the leader pretty much was a whole rhythm section by himself and a master at keeping the pulse steady—which is why a weak sister like bassist Charlie Turner could last so long, reliability and clever role playing to the fore. The bottom line was that being part of the Rhythm was one of the best jobs a jazz musician could ask for, which accounts for the stability of its personnel.

The Rhythm Dramatis Personae

As we have noted, the basic sextet was quite frequently augmented, notably for touring, but we won't detail the many supernumeraries. The mainstays are trumpeter Herman Autrey (1904-80), in from the start until August 1939, and back for a 1941 stint; clarinetist-tenor saxist Gene Sedic (1907-63), in from the second Rhythm date until the end, except for eight months in 1935, when he was spelled by the able Rudy Powell (1907-76), clarinet and alto sax; guitarist Al Casey (1915-05), there from first to last, but for one lengthy and a few brief absences.

Also on hand for an impressive stretch is bassist Cedric Wallace (1904 or 1909-85), who came on board when Charles "Fat Man" Turner (ca. 1900-64) left in the fall of 1937 and remained; Turner's predecessor, the excellent Billy Taylor, only made the first four sessions—his reason for leaving was a good one: Duke Ellington wanted him.

Drummers were a varied lot. Harry Dial (1907-87) lasted for just one year, followed by Arnold Boling and Yank Porter; then, in August 1936, Wilmore "Slick" Jones (1907-69) settled in for the next five years, with Arthur "Traps" Trappier taking over until the end.

In the guitar chair, two unrelated Smiths, first and briefly, Casey's teacher James, then, for almost a year from June 1939, the no doubt younger John, filled in for the incumbent. Casey's long busman's holi-day was spent with Teddy Wilson's fine but short-lived big band.

And it was in an edition of the Waller big band that trumpeter John "Bugs" Hamilton (1911-47) first entered Fats' orbit, in the spring of 1938; he must have made a good impression, since he became Autrey's replacement a year or so later, remaining to the end.

To play (and stay) with the Rhythm, a musician had to be a quick study, versatile and flexible, and a team player. The two-horn front line had a special responsibility, since, aside from the leader, they had the bulk of solo space. Autrey was a perfect fit. As a soloist, he had absorbed much of Louis Armstrong's language, and his time was good, but perhaps best of all, he was extremely adept with mutes, making good use of not only the common cup, Harmon and straight variety, but also the plunger (he was a good growler, too) and buzz mutes, thus adding more colors and textures to the group than most. His successor, Hamilton, was very good with the Harmon and an inventive soloist, but not as vital a presence as Autrey, whose humor dove-tailed nicely with the leader's. Both trumpeters were good at backing Fats' vocals, at any tempo. (Hamilton's early death was due to tuber-culosis; he also worked for Stuff Smith and Louis Jordan. Autrey's long career was highlighted by his years with the Saints & Sinners, co-led

by Vic Dickenson and Red Richards, with whom he twice toured Europe and also did some engaging vocalizing.)

Sedric, too, had many colors at his disposal, notably on clarinet; he had fine tone all over his range, was good at subtone, and projected well. His sound was warm on both horns, and his tenor style, unlike that of most contemporaries, was not in the mold of Coleman Hawkins. Born in St. Louis, he broke in on the riverboats and went to Europe early (1923) and for a long time (almost a decade), was with Sam Wooding's band. The Hawk himself cited Gene as one of his predecessors, but he wasn't old-fashioned, and he could swing. Like Autrey, he was an expert vocal accompanist, and like Autrey, he often touched base with his Waller past in later years (they were reunited in pianist Dick Wellstood's Wallerites). Both as a leader and sideman, "Honeybear," as he was fondly nicknamed, was much in demand on the New York jazz scene until illness ended his career in 1961.

Al Casey, who died just four days short of his 90th birthday, was musically and professionally reared by Fats, and was among the most distinctive acoustic guitarists in jazz, as soloist and rhythm player, but also among the first to make the transition to electric, a move encouraged by the leader. A fixture on 52nd Street and frequent award-winner, Casey later adapted to R&B, working for four years with King Curtis; then, after a period of semi-retirement, he spent his final two decades with the Harlem Blues and Jazz Band, also often touring Britain as a single. John Smith does a nice job of filling in for Casey.

Bass solos were not on the Rhythm's menu. Taylor was in a class by himself among pre-Blanton practitioners. Turner retired from music shortly after leaving Fats; before, he had long led the house band at the Arcadia Ballroom. But he retained a foothold in the music world as owner-operator of a Harlem hangout, The Fat Man's, immortalized by Charlie Shavers with Tommy Dorsey's band. Cedric Wallace was a good section man who later enjoyed a long run leading the resident combo at Manhattan's swank Le Ruban Bleu.

The loquacious Harry Dial seems to have talked himself out of his Rhythm gig; he wrote an autobiography and dabbled at singing and songwriting, but spent most of his later years working in a bank. Slick Jones is an underrated drummer, as his consistently excellent work with Fats bears out; he swings, has a fine cymbal touch, and knows about dynamics. After the Rhythm, he worked with many names, including fiddlers Stuff Smith and Eddie South, and did a long stint with old teammate Sedric, ending his career with Eddie Durham. The little-known Boling and the well-established Porter and Trappier, the latter with a nice, light touch, handle their positions well, but keeping time was never a problem with Fats as the embedded metronome!

Disc One: Fats Waller Sings and Plays Fats Waller

It's passing strange that Fats waited so long to put what already had become a jazz standard on a record of his own, but it was certainly worth waiting for. This is our set's only sample of Bill Coleman's trumpet with the Rhythm; he only made this and one other session. But what

matters here is our main man, who picks the perfect tempo for a number often done too fast. He presents his melody with lots of decorative touches—dig those garlands. The relaxed vocal ends with a wonderfully rhythmic declamation of the title. The ensuing riff, introduced on Fletcher Henderson's great version, probably originated with Claude Hopkins; catch Fats' great fills and that magisterial solo bridge. The brief vocal reprise ends with a typical "yes, yes" which we happily echo...

"How Can You Face Me?," hot off the sheet music press, is a favorite of mine, song and record. This was a unique session (we get another sample on Disc Two) that found Mezz Mezzrow in Sedic's place, and Mezz's great Chicago friend, Floyd O'Brien, as the only trombonist on a small-group Rhythm date. Mezz, famed for other things than his somewhat sour-toned clarinet (neither as great nor as bad as debaters have it), might well have brought samples of his merchandise along; in any case, a wonderfully mellow mood prevails. Again, a perfect tempo; vocal right on, with fine cup-muted Autrey backing, Fats giving the lyric full value, with additions ("woman," f. ex.) for emphasis, not satire—what a fine singer he was, with that light baritone and clear enunciation—then a standout piano solo (how he could vary his touch; don't miss the bell effects) that ends with a funky final bar, the perfect setup for O'Brien's dirty plunger-muted solo, laced with Fats' banter, and with a relaxed Mezz bridge. A desert island gem!

"The Panic Is On" is a favorite of Waller expert and acolyte Marty Grosz, guitarist, singer and keeper-alive of Fats' spirit. It's in minor, and comes at us with a piano solo sans rhythm backing. The vocal is classic Fats, ominous, great dramatics (what an actor he was with his voice!), fine Sedic, Casey and Autrey (plunger and pixie-mute), and a vocal reprise rife with gallows humor.

"Sugar Rose" has a lovely opening, Fats alternating celeste and piano, right and left—and what a bridge he builds. Pretty tune, vocal in Fats' pretty mode, cute stuff with Autrey good behind him and in solo (cup muted). In contrast, "I'm Crazy 'bout My Baby" (first recorded in 1931, with Fats' first vocal) is up, piano opening in full swing; note the bridge and hear where Basie comes from. The vocal is humorous; he approaches his own tunes in the same spirit as songs by others: irreverence. Happy Sedic, open Autrey, a la Louis (always when on open horn), plenty of patter. "Lost Love," a fine example of Waller and Razaf in a serious romantic mood, is presented by straight clarinet with piano embroidery, Fats taking a masterful bridge. Does Fats know how to sell a song, vocally? What a fine straight singer he could be; again, he excels on the bridge. That piano tag is pretty—and funky! The mood is sustained on "Our Love Was Meant To Be." The opening piano solo is fairly straight, but don't miss those sly touches, and the great ending trill. His vocal again is in a straight mode and shows his range—neat how that "ah, baby" sets up the bridge—everything this man does means something, though it might seem like a throwaway. Nice tag!

Change the mood for the famous "The Joint Is Jumpin'." This is a prime example of how to paint a picture by way of a three-minute (2:47, to be exact) record. (This is where Louis Jordan went to school, but of course the other Louis started it all.) This was a studio party—the co-composers and other friends on hand—and there are all sorts of sound effects. Sedic's tenor

jumps, but note how, throughout, Fats keeps that piano moving—the momentum is never lost amid those good-time noises. The vocal tag is justly famous, and still sound advice!

Contrast: “A Hopeless Love Affair” is another “serious” romantic song, at a leisurely tempo, but how Fats makes it swing—and that rhythmic impulse keeps the vocal, delivered at the top of Fats’ range, from any hint of sentimentalization. This is all his show; horns are subliminal, rhythm section insignificant. As he asides, “oh, mercy!”

“Hold My Hand” gives us our first taste of the big band. Don Donaldson, an able craftsman, did most of the arranging. Nice melody, guitar intro, piano solo with a 3/4 feel, Fats sings the verse and chorus with a lilt, Sedic’s tenor scores, and Autrey rides over the closing ensemble. As one would expect, this is a pretty relaxed big band.

“Patty Cake” is the kind of thing Fats could toss off in his sleep; it’s not exactly deep stuff, but he makes it tasty. Food and music images abound (some of our deconstructionists will say it’s all about sex, and maybe so, but no kiddie police needed), and Fats is in a jolly mood, offering “That’s how rhythm was born” during Sedic’s hot tenor bit. Autrey dons the Harmon, and riffs ensue. “Honey Hush” and “Anita” were made right after Fats returned from his second European trip, and he’s on. Autrey and Wallace were the only regulars available, but no harm done. Tenorist Graham and drummer Hinton never returned, but guitarist John Smith was Fats’ choice to fill in for Casey. “Honey” is another romantic opus; the lyrics by Ed Kirkeby, and Fats renders it not quite tongue in cheek until the end. Pianowise, he dishes it out, so relaxed and again giving a lesson in how to make this tempo swing: He takes his time! The vocal reprise is priceless; he even throws in a whistle to depict the lyric’s thrush.

“Anita” is another story—this is Fats’ tribute to his de facto wife and true love. It’s a love of mine, too, from first hearing. That bridge is a joy—escalator effect, as on our next selection. Fine piano offering before the vocal, which is yet another lesson in timing. Nice cup-muted Autrey and chorded guitar, but how about that vocal reprise! He’s on!

“Squeeze Me” was Fats’ first copyright and long since a traditional jazz standard. Again, Fats makes it worth the wait, wrapping it in one of those perfectly poised tempos, with a brilliant opening piano solo—a paraphrase of the theme, with an interesting bass pattern, and that escalator. The vocal is no letdown, tender and funny (“Don’t make your fat daddy cry”). Warm Sedic tenor, and first Bugs Hamilton solo, cup-muted and well conceived, Fats egging him on. The piano ending is the perfect match for the intro; this is a lovely arrangement of a great tune.

Can’t say the same for “Old Grand Dad”—one of those celebrations of an ancestor, not to be taken more seriously than Fats does (it’s also a noted libation, of course). Nice sixteen and eight by Bugs, and Fats’ piano makes you imagine there actually is something to this piece of music. Next on the menu is a riff tune, its title inspired by the composer’s observation of an extremely well-upholstered singer’s exit into the wings. Casey’s single-string offering takes solo honors—he’s heard Charlie Christian—and neat brush work from Slick.

The Big Band, in a late edition, is back for “Ain’t Nothing To It,” whose title is parenthetical to “Gettin’ Much Lately,” no doubt considered too risqué—but as it was, the piece remained unissued, except that a few 78 copies contained it in error of a piece called “Come And Get It” (and so labeled). All clear? The music is good, Fats, piano and vocal, a trumpet I take to be Bugs (Autrey also in band), and a particularly excellent passage by the saxophone section, inspired by Benny Carter, and laced with piano trills. Good drumming in the out-chorus as well, and four bars of probably Jimmy Powell’s alto.

Fats was good at the blues but rarely featured it straight. “Bessie, Bessie, Bessie,” is an exception, with a great vocal and lots of Walleresque banter: he tells Sedric, “Earn it, earn it,” yielding a spot of fine clarinet, and exhorts the guitarist with “Righteous, Brother Casey, righteous!”, concluding a piece that remained unissued on 78 with “Step out the window and turn left,” adopted as a book title by the Danish, humorist and Waller friend Baron Timme Rosenkrantz.

Fats’ support of the war effort was eager—he did loads of free performances for the troops—and “Cash For Your Trash” is a memento, as the opening verse makes clear. The piano solo is another display of Fats’ ability to vary his touch and dynamics, with a superb final four bars. Nice ensemble touches, too—the Rhythm of late 1941 was up-to-date. (The A section of this tune owes much to “Pennies From Heaven,” by the way.) “You Must Be Losing Your Mind” brings back the big band; in a minor key, its threatening lyric is not to be taken too seriously. Bugs takes the growl solo, and there’s good drumming by “Traps” Trappier.

“Up Jumped You With Love” is one of Fats’ late gems—simplicity itself but oh, so perfect. His piano lays it out, then he delivers the vocal with superb panache—his time is stupendous. There’s some educated riffing that swings to the hilt, but relaxed, and a vocal reprise that has Fats belting his “fine love, Arabian love.”

We conclude this sampling of 22 of Fats Waller’s more than 400 tunes with the most famous, “Ain’t Misbehavin’,” here as heard in the film *Stormy Weather*. He’s done it thousands of times by then, but his piano opening is so fresh—again, dig the bridge, and that delicious last eight. The vocal is magisterial and sly (seeing it is even better), with Slim Moore’s trombone backing, and then old buddy Zutty Singleton hits his cow bell and we’re off to the races, with Fats and Zutty fashioning a ver-itable duet. Benny Carter’s trumpet leads the ensemble climax, then back to the opening tempo, and Fats has the final word. We’re blessed that he got to make that last film, which captured him.

Disc 2:Fats Waller: Strictly Instrumental

Fats’ first work as a contract artist for Victor (not yet acquired by RCA) was as an organist, and indeed that instrument was his great love. The Estey church organ in Victor’s Camden studio was a fine one, and Fats explores its many colors on his interpretation of “St. Louis Blues,” turning the already venerable piece into a veritable stomp with his ability to make the pipe organ swing. No mean feat, that, when you consider the time lag between the striking of the

keys (and pulling of the stops) and the resulting sound—but Fats’ sense of time was unflappable.

The next two selections commemorate the joint appearance of Fats and mentor James P. Johnson in the pit band of the Broadway show *Keep Shufflin’*. There, they performed at twin grand pianos, but in Camden, Fats mans the organ. The engineers solved the balance problems very well indeed, and the two keyboards and two horns (Jabbo Smith on cornet; Garvin Bushell tripling on clarinet, alto sax, and bassoon) make for a unique and mellifluous quartet. “Sippi,” a Johnson opus, is from the show’s score—a sweet, little thing melody that Jabbo almost croons in exposition. Bushell (1902–91) later expressed reservations about his bassooning (he would record on the instrument with John Coltrane in 1961!), but it sounds just fine here. The star, however, is 18 year-old Jabbo (1908-91), whose lovely full chorus spans Armstrong and Beiderbecke (the last eight bars conjure up Bix) but spells Jabbo Smith. On the jaunty “Thou Swell,” a Rodgers and Hart standard-to-be, the keyboardists are more prominent. Organ brings it on with the verse and chorus, Fats making fine use of register changes—he KNOWS the instrument! Bushell’s alto at first is sweet à la Trumbauer (and Wiedoeft), then jumps it; then Jabbo wafts his brass hat in front of the bell, again hinting of Bix. James P. comes to the fore, striding away, and then the horns (Bushell on clarinet) jam it out. If you thought that jazz of the 1920s was unsophisticated stuff, think again!

Get ready now for a generous helping of Fats at the piano, all by him-self. Eight of the ten pieces are his compositions, starting with “Numb Fumblin’,” which is anything but that—never was a title less descriptive. What we have here is a 12-bar blues, six choruses plus a four-bar introduction, and, as Paul S. Machlin has pointed out, while the piece retains an improvisatory character, it is in fact ingeniously held together by the consistent reappearance of a motive that first raises its head in measure five of the first chorus, then in the opening of the second—and then, dear listener, you’re on your own. Altogether a shining example of just how far, by early 1929, Fats had come as a pianist and composer.

Five months later, he embarks on a very busy recording schedule: from August through December, he is in the studio no less than 13 times. The very first version of “Ain’t Misbehavin’” differs from the very last (which concludes CD 1) in many ways, not least the tempo (here a jaunty, 1920ish dancing feel), and the inclusion of the pretty verse, which appears after the first chorus, and is followed by three more. Each of the four is distinctively different, and the solo format enables the composer to depart from strict bar construction and insert additional measures here and there. Again, we are impressed with his creative use of dynamics.

With Walter Donaldson’s “Love Me Or Leave Me,” from the same session, we sample Fats’ way with a hit of the day that became a standard. His interpretation is very personal, opening with the verse, then parsing the chorus rhythmically (first), then intensifying it with a single-note bass line and a contrasting two-fisted bridge (second), then having fun tickling the ivories, as he might have put it (third) and adding a tricky, modulating coda.

“Smashin’ Thirds,” unlike “Numb Fumblin’,” is a better title for what is a true piano piece of three strains, constructed very much like a rag rather than a pop tune. It moves from start to finish (great half-time ending) with that unique Wallerian propulsion, and we get fourths and fifths as well as thirds along the way. “My Fate Is In Your Hands,” in contrast, is a pop tune, and ranks with Fats’ best work in that vein. Again he gives us the verse—alas, today verses have almost entirely dropped from jazz usage, kept alive only by a few perceptive singers—setting up the chorus, to which his use of whole notes lends a singing quality. Next comes an imaginative paraphrase (hear the last eight), and another of those neat Waller endings.

Fats had to wait five years for his next solo piano session, and it was a rich one, yielding four masterpieces in two-and-a-half hours. Here are two. “African Ripples,” more ripples than discernibly African, starts in a manner very much like Willie “The Lion” Smith, with block chords; the next contrasting strain hints of Gershwin. Fats effectively changes gears several times and as usual, varies touch and dynamics. “Viper’s Drag,” a favorite of all subsequent striders, is a two-strainer, minor and major. The first is rather ominous, with a bass motive borrowed from Grieg’s “Hall Of The Mountain King.” The major is a happy, fast venture into stride, with a light touch, then a brief interlude returns us to the minor “drag” strain, ending with a coda that sounds spur-of-the-moment. (The viper of the title is not a snake but a marijuana smoker.)

The next solo session, from mid-1937, also produced gold. Fats’ own “Keepin’ Out Of Mischief Now” is an evergreen, just 20 bars long and without a bridge, so there’s time for four choruses in laid-back swing tempo, with lots of variety, decorative flourishes, swirls, chromatic runs, and a virtuosic coda. “Star Dust” is a masterful interpretation of the Carmichael classic, wonderfully varied, ultra-relaxed, with manifold colors and textures—that man knows what to do with a piano, and how to concentrate in a recording studio. (Factoid: both these solos are of the exact same length—3:12.)

Four years later, Fats’ final solo session produced an absolutely stunning version of the ultimate stride-piano test piece, James P. Johnson’s “Carolina Shout.” Of the four strains, the first is played twice, then returns at the end, while the others proceed B-C-D-C-D. The tempo is demandingly fast, but Fats doesn’t drop a stitch; he’s in total command, and the tempo is rock-solid. What a pity that Fats didn’t record more of the stride repertory at this stage of his development...

That memorable gathering that brought us “How Can You Face Me” returns for “Serenade For A Wealthy Widow,” the best-known work of Reginald Foresythe, British-born pianist-composer, with an African father and German mother (1907-58), who wrote for Armstrong, Earl Hines and Paul Whiteman, among others. It’s a tricky, effective piece, and after Fats’ opening comment (“Woman—they tells me you’re flooded with currency, so give, give!”), they make the serenade a mightily swinging one. A highlight is the brass duet: Autrey’s open trumpet and Floyd O’Brien’s plungered trombone.

“Rosetta” is forever associated with Earl Hines, but Henri Woode wrote it before Fatha adopted it. Fats picks a very slow tempo, intro-ducing it on piano and switching to celeste behind Rudy

Powell's subtone theme statement, then back on piano to accompany Autrey's straight-muted trumpet, Powell's bridge, and horns out in tandem, Herman doing a Louis.

Fats' road big band got to make some records which did not enter general circulation until the LP era; "Functionizin'" was issued on 78 only in Switzerland. The piece is the only published movement from Fats' "Harlem Living Room Suite." It was arranged by the gifted, short-lived Alex Hill, who also recorded it with his own band. It sounds to me like a mixture of "Squeeze Me" (first strain) and "Muskrat Ramble" (second strain). Nice, relaxed work by the band, notably the reed section, with solo spots for Autrey, Sedric's tenor, and a trumpet that may be Ed Anderson. Minimal piano here.

No one but Fats Waller could have invented and realized "Loungin' At The Waldorf," a unique and wonderful creation that is also a masterpiece of social satire. The AABA theme (with a break at bridge's end) is a catchy riffer, the tempo is just perfect, and Fats' commentary is priceless, as he assumes the mantle of hotel factotum, variously greeting the guests and giving a tour to a visiting friend, also commenting on the musical happenings (thus, after Sedric's fine effort, "Sweet Caesar, what a break!"). And to the visitor: "What's that? You know they don't pass no chit'lins in here!" If this is new to you, it demands repeated listening; I've loved it for more than 60 years.

Back to strictly instrumental for "Blue, Turnin' Grey Over You," one of the several Waller songs immortalized by Louis Armstrong. This is a 12-inch 78 version, the Rhythm's only excursion into that size, prompted by an album anthology, *A Symposium Of Swing*, which was RCA Victor's response to Decca's *Five Feet Of Swing*. The additional time, about a minute's worth here, does not yield a lot of added interest—it almost seems as if departing from the customary format the Rhythm had mastered merely made them less focused. Not that this isn't a nice effort—there are windows for Casey's strumming, and Slick gets a rare solo turn, punctuated by piano. Autrey dons his buzz mute, Fats offers some contra-puntal doings, and Sedric's tenor is heard for a good full chorus.

"In The Gloamin'," an oldie even then, is heard in a big-band setting, arranged by Fats himself, with no doubt a helping hand from Don Donaldson. It starts ever so softly, with spare piano, picking up at the bridge (Fats quotes from his "Handful Of Keys"), with a fine last eight. Trombonist John "Shorty" Haughton plays it straight, a la Tommy Dorsey, an alto (Jimmy Powell?) surfaces, with nice brass backing, and Autrey gets out that buzz mute once again.

"Mamacita" is a rhumba, the most popular Latin dance of the day. For the first time, we hear Fats on the Hammond organ, Casey responding to his catchy theme statement, and very active Slick Jones. They go into 4/4, and the horns come in, Bugs Hamilton with cup mute, Fats prominent behind them. Back to Latin for bridge, but swinging it out, with a drum tag. As goes almost without saying by now, perfect tempo, not too fast...

Masterpiece time: Fats' "Jitterbug Waltz" is one of his last truly great compositions. It took quite a while, but when Zoot Sims adopted it, with prodding from Fats fan Jimmy Rowles, it

entered the jazz repertory and hasn't left. It works at any tempo, but the one Fats chose for this big band version, featuring his Hammond organ, gives the melody maximum value. Casey and Sedic (clarinet) help out, but this is Fats' show, with fine fills and voicings as the band states and re-states the theme.

We end this instrumental excursion with our second "Honeysuckle Rose," this one from a get-together that was the brainchild of recording director (now we'd say A&R man) Eli Oberstein. Fats and Tommy Dorsey were among the label's stars, Bunny Berigan was about to launch his second big band and signed with Victor, and guitarist Dick McDonough and drummer George Wettling were not only fine players but first-call studio guys, vastly experienced. What Oberstein might not have known is that his "Jam Session at Victor" cast was all-star in the drinking department as well, and what had been scheduled for a four-side session just about yielded two. But good they were. "Honeysuckle" hangs together well, book-ended by a clever little figure, probably of the composer's devising. This is not chamber music, but hot, vigorous music, Dorsey not in his "Sentimental Gentleman" role here. Berigan, one of the best on his horn, is splendid, and McDonough, a marvelous acoustic guitarist, mixes chords and single notes to fine effect. Fats follows with a solo that varies the rhythm but never stops swinging and even fools around with a key change, and in the ensemble, he makes you forget that there's no bass.

Disc Three: Fats Sings and Plays around with Tin Pan Alley

The Tin Pan Alley tag is not quite applicable to "You Rascal You," the brainchild of singer-entertainer Sam (Spo-dee-oo-dee) Theard. It became a hit via Louis Armstrong's recording, made some six months before Fats guested with his friend, the great Texas-born trombonist and singer Jack Teagarden, who had in turn been Fats' guest on a couple of 1929 Victor sessions. The two had first met hanging out with the Fletcher Henderson band. The theme-aggravated husband accusing friend of hanky-panky with wife—lends itself to dialogue and is the first recorded example of Fats' gift for ad-libbing as he denies all. Teagarden also departs from the text; his "I'll tip a pistol atcha!" is strictly home-grown. Fats also offers a happy piano spot. The ad-hoc band includes Jack's kid brother, trumpeter Charlie, just 18 but surefooted, and the excellent drummer Stan King. Fats was a pioneer in racially integrated recording.

"You're Not The Only Oyster In The Stew" is an extension of that topic, being the final offering from the session with Mezz Mezzrow and Floyd O'Brien that gave us "How Can You Face Me" and "Serenade To A Wealthy Widow."

This one, though, is all Fats' show, and he works wonders with a piece of fluff. (Hardly a hit—the only other recording I've found is by Ozzie Nelson and Harriett Hilliard; to hear it is to realize just how much Fats does to improve it, making you think there's something to the melody.) Great minimalist piano opening, laid-back singing, phrasing artfully behind the beat, and delivering the list-lyric's every ounce of meaning.

The bane of a sappy lyric, Fats could also be the songwriter's best pal.

“What’s The Reason,” a jaunty lover’s complaint, opens with Fats *sotto voce*, then his piano swings out, laced with verbal asides. Casey strums mightily in response to the command “Latch on!” Rudy Powell growls cheerfully on his clarinet, Autrey does his bit on open horn, and then Fats reprises vocally, punching out his phrases. They make it sound so easy!

“Lulu’s Back In Town” is good Tin Pan Alley stuff; Al Dubin and Harry Warren made a fine team. We can tell Fats likes this one; it’s a gem, from the setup (voice and guitar) to the marvelous piano exposition, through the in-the-pocket vocal (does he ever make you believe he’s looking forward to his date), the happy horn stuff, and the vocal reprise, ending with the spoken “Oh, that woman’s back in town!” This tune was a favorite of Mel Torme’s, but good as his was, we’ll take Fatsy Watsy’s!

Later that same day, Fats and company tackled a brand-new song at Eli Oberstein’s request. A great song it isn’t, but pleasant enough in the genre of unrequited love, and Fats treats it gently, having chosen a very relaxed tempo (Victor’s engineers never worried much about length, and Fats often went well over three minutes—here it’s 3:29). Piano opens, establishing the melody as Fats does so well, with decorative fills, and his vocal is in the same groove, quite straight, with that fine diction, and a touch of gentle humor. Autrey, with Harmon, has a melodic say, and then Fats sings the last eight bars, repeating “make believe” for emphasis. Hits are never easy to explain; if they were, they could be made to order. “Letter” became the Rhythm’s biggest seller, giving Fats star status in Victor’s stable of artists. To this day, many think of the tune as one of his own. Needless to say, it was not a typical Waller treatment.

“Dinah” entered the jazz repertory via Ethel Waters in 1925, but it was Armstrong who made it hot and made it stick. Fats takes a page from Louis’ book here and gives the old girl a fabulous ride. Nice tempo—fast but not too—and fairly straight but swinging-to-the-hilt vocal for openers, then Powell’s reedy but ready clarinet, with superb backing from Fats and Casey. Autrey, open, does a Louis in response to Fats’ “Toot that thing!” and then the piece de resistance: a piano solo that is a microcosmic sample of his keyboard wizardry, a distillation of essence of Waller, 150-proof. (When I first acquired this disc, I played that solo over and over again—in the days of 78 only, we would get our music a few discs at a time, and truly savor it. CDs are a feast, of course, but sampling is better for ingestion than gulping down.) Don’t miss the scat tag!

We segue from scat to scat: “There’ll Be Some Changes Made” opens with a delightful sample, whereupon Fats, in his frequently assumed role of tenant-in-arrears, is subjected to haranguing by his landlord (the accent assumed by Fats can be heard as Italian, or non-specific Mediterranean; he has fun with it). Then he sings the 1920s song in his real voice, with fine Casey backing. Autrey (cup mute) and Powell (in two registers) contribute nicely, more Fats pat-ter interlaced, and then Fats sings again, telling us he’ll “change the way Fats Waller struts his stuff,” and scatting it out. Nifty!

“Somebody Stole My Gal” is our third item from the marathon Camden session that also yielded “Dinah” and “Changes,” plus seven more. It’s also the third “oldie,” and there were two others. Was Fats on a nostalgia kick? I doubt it, but Victor would have had its reasons. Anyway, as we’ve heard, our man had great fun with this material, and “Gal” is no exception. His mock-weepy opening vocal is strictly burlesque, the stomping piano solo that follows strictly barrelhouse. Rudy tries hard and almost succeeds while Herman bounces a good one, with bucket mute—a man of many sounds. More vocal fun, the band is jumping; dig Casey! Dig Herman! Fats does sing the real lyrics here, but gets in a final dig with his tag line: “Bring her right back—on roller skates!”

“Christopher Columbus” is a riffer concocted by the great tenor man Chu Berry (with an assist from his buddy Roy Eldridge, according to Roy) while with Fletcher Henderson, whose band introduced it; Fats’ sidekick, Andy Razaf, equipped it with a lyric. It gets classic Fats treatment that never stops swinging—if you can sit still to this, something is wrong. Fats, man of many voices, delivers masterful vocal pantomime here while the rhythm section churns. Gene Sedric’s tenor comes out swinging for a first-class outing while Fats stomps and romps, more so on his own, and still more behind Autrey on top of the band, then easing way down for the concluding verbal come-dy (don’t miss the fruity educated accent). Fats knew he’d come up with a goodie—he featured it twice on national radio shows in ensuing months. “It’s A Sin To Tell A Lie,” a tearjerker introduced by Kate Smith on radio, was recorded by nine-year-old Bobby Breen before Fats, but after he got through with it, it was hard to take the two sopranos seriously. He changes it from 3/4 to 4/4, swinging the melody and dressing it in stride. Deceptively, he begins the lyric rather straight, but proceeds to demolish it, in several voices, with such inspirations as “if you break my heart, I’ll break your jaw.” Sedric’s clarinet yields to very hot Autrey, prodded by the boss, who then dishes out riffs and shouts out a vocal climax. Fats knew how to deal with tawdry sentiments.

“She’s Tall, She’s Tan, She’s Terrific” is treated by Fats as an enthusiastic paean to a pretty girl; contemporary sensibilities might be offended while others will prefer it to the rappers’ approach to the subject. Fats opens with some fine ivory tickling; his vocal, good guitar behind, is intimate and half-spoken, and his piano makes more of the simple tune than expected. Sedric tenor, vocal reprise (great rhythmic phrasing), and cute piano tag.

Back to the good old good ones, as Louis called them, with “The Sheik Of Araby,” a subject far more popular in the days of Rudolph Valentino, the inspiration for this song, than at this writing. The melody appealed to jazz players from the start, but well before Fats, the lyrics had been satirized (f. ex., Teagarden with Red Nichols). The big band setting is nice and uncluttered, piano solo setting the mood, Shorty Haughton’s trombone stating the melody. Vocally, Fats again starts almost straight but soon rips the romantic sentiments to shreds (in performance, he would coach the audience in the “with no pants on” refrain that survives to this day). Autrey, in cup mute, jumps in for one of his best, exhorted by Fats to ride a camel. He shouts “Yeah!” and the band romps out in style, very loose.

“Two Sleepy People” changes the mood; Fats gives the Hoagy Carmichael-Frank Loesser collaboration due consideration, embellishing Autrey’s straight melody with fills and trills, then rendering the vocal in his as-straight-as-I-get mode, putting the song over with his perfect diction and that smile in his voice.

Back to oldies with “A Good Man Is Hard To Find,” which Fats takes pretty much at face value: no-frills piano intro and solo, vocal in his upper range, with breaks, good Sedric tenor (dig his breaks), Bugs Hamilton on open horn in the upper range (the *lingua franca* of jazz trumpeting at this time was so steeped in Armstrong’s vocabulary that Hamilton and Autrey seem interchangeable within the Rhythm, though each man has his own voice), also with good breaks, a riff à la “Honeysuckle Rose,” and out with vocal breaks. Nice tempo, needless to say...

“Hold Tight” was a big hit for the Andrews Sisters, who probably gave scant thought to its food-sex symbolism—these were innocent days. Fats knew, of course, but doesn’t overplay it. This is an ensemble effort, vocally as well—shades of Louis Jordan—heard here in a previously unissued take. “‘Tain’t What You Do” is another swing-era novelty co-authored by jazz musicians (pioneer electric guitarist Leonard Ware was in on “Hold Tight”), this one originating with Jimmie Lunceford’s band, of which Trummy Young and Sy Oliver were members. There’s only so much Fats can do with its routine, but his piano solo is harmonically very hip and he adds some falsetto vocal leaps. As usual, good Sedric tenor; his clarinet is the musical point of interest in yet another novelty, “Your Feet’s Too Big.” Nobody else could have done this much with a piece of nonsense, but Fats picks a laid-back tempo and sells the song in a relaxed, sly manner, topping it off with a verbal flourish.

“Darktown Strutters Ball,” vintage 1917, was penned by the gifted Shelton Brooks who had given Sophie Tucker “Some Of These Days.” Fats takes it at face value—it was long established by then as a jazz standard—and opens with two strutting piano choruses and a relaxed vocal. Sedric’s tenor raises the temperature and Fats gets active behind open-horned Bugs. Slick Jones gets his inning, his well-executed press rolls (a lost drummers’ art) backed by piano, and they jam it out, Gene now on clarinet, ending on a dime.

“I Can’t Give You Anything But Love” is supposedly one of the dozens of songs Fats sold, but the fact that he recorded it makes one doubt it, as does Jimmy McHugh’s solid accomplishment and vast output. Be that as it may, it’s a great song, but in company with his erstwhile protege Una Mae Carlisle, Fats here uses it as a vehicle for comedy, with a bit of a bite (so maybe he wrote it after all). His comments behind Una Mae are perfectly timed barbs; he follows that with his own half-spoken chorus, but ends with a conciliatory gesture.

Back to novelties with “You Run Your Mouth,” a Lil’ Armstrong opus also recorded by her ex-husband. (Fats made a point, as did Louis, of recording many works by black songwriters.) It’s obvious that Fats enjoys himself here, telling his antagonist off in no uncertain terms and trotting out some of his fancy vocabulary near the end. Hamilton is the trumpeter here, actively backed by Fats.

With Matt Dennis' "Let's Get Away From It All," we're in a modern era of songwriting, which Fats of course handles with aplomb (and, in the time he was granted, excelled at himself, as in his *Early To Bed* score). He chose an unusual setting here, much like what he would have done in an intimate nightclub, a preferred venue by this time. With just guitar and drums, he's at the Hammond organ, handling it with taste and time (the tempo is exquisitely laid back) and exposing the melody quite straight, giving it that Waller rhythm on the bridge. Then he sings, intimately, attending to every nuance of meaning, almost crooning the bridge. For kicks, compare this with young Sinatra's version (with the Pied Pipers and Tommy Dorsey).

"Tain't Nobody's Biz-ness If I Do" dates back to Fats' early days in music, with friend Spencer Williams' memorable words. We can be sure he could relate to their message, and he delivers them with aplomb. Once again, one marvels at his choice of tempo, and how solidly it is sustained. He's on form in the opening piano solo, the vocal is in there, as they used to say, and so are Gene Sedric's two tenor choruses, the second probably on Fats' signal, with a Casey bridge. Bugs joins in, Slick gets a spot, and Fats sings and swings it out, with a piano tag.

It was indeed nobody's business what Fats Waller did on his own time, but when it came to taking care of business in the recording studio, he was the complete professional. Not one of the hundreds of sides he recorded with his Rhythm was below par and many a one was a masterpiece. All bore his unique personal stamp. He was indeed phonogenic, and after all these years, he still comes to life when we listen to that piano and that voice and that incomparable beat.

—Dan Morgenstern

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Dan Morgenstern is the Director of the Institute of Jazz studies at Rutgers University in Newark, NJ. He is also the author of *Living with Jazz* (Pantheon Books)