“Ain’t Misbehavin’”--Thomas “Fats” Waller (1929)

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Fats Waller

Fats Waller's rise to lasting fame as an entertaining singer with a witty twist on the popular songs of his day was still several years off when he arrived at the Camden, New Jersey, studios of the Victor Talking Machine Company for a recording session in the summer of 1929. Victor, like other major record companies, had only recently discovered that there could be big business in what in those days were called “race” records, and Waller was one of a number of African American jazz musicians the company was eager to put on disc.

It was the tenth visit that Thomas “Fats” Waller had made to the Camden studios, but the first time—and the last—that one of his sessions would be devoted exclusively to recording a series of his own inventive piano solos. Waller was then 25 years old and already one of the masters of the distinctive style of jazz piano playing known as “stride” that had grown up in the New York City area in the 1920s. A descendant of ragtime, stride took its name from the long back and forth leaps the pianist’s left hand made to mark out a propulsive rhythm, alternating between low bass notes and bluesy chords in the middle of the keyboard.

Stride pianists were a staple of the Harlem scene, playing at nightclubs and all-night dance parties, where they drew on a repertoire of improvisational techniques to provide a continuous flow of music for hours on end. Sometimes two or three pianists would switch off during the night, each trying to outdo the others with an ever-increasing array of improvisational fireworks as they took turns playing the same tunes. These “cutting contests” helped to shape the distinctive individual styles that Waller and his fellow stride pianists came to be known for.

Waller had learned from the master of stride himself, James P. Johnson, initially by slowing down player-piano rolls that Johnson had made and placing his fingers over the keys as they dropped down to learn the movements of Johnson’s hands. But he quickly brought a technically dazzling and exuberant style all his own to his playing, especially in the improvisations and right-hand “tricks,” as stride pianists called them—quick, syncopated embellishments of a melody—that made Waller’s playing instantly recognizable with its trademark buoyant infectiousness and fresh liveliness.

The Victor studio was in a deconsecrated church the company had bought in 1918, located amid its sprawling complex of factories and offices in downtown Camden where it manufactured the famous Victrola record wind-up players and discs. The company had then spent years remodeling the space as a studio that could accommodate everything from orchestras to solos,

classical to jazz, and had also refurbished the building's 2,000-pipe church organ for use in classical and popular performances.

Victor apparently believed that there was greater commercial promise in recordings of African American musicians featuring vocals and small ensembles than piano solos, and Waller's earlier sessions mostly had him accompanying spirituals or blues singers. He had, though, astounded Victor executives at his very first session at Camden by sitting down at the organ and rattling off two numbers as a warm up--W. C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues" and a piece of his own, "Lenox Avenue Blues." It was no small feat to make the pipe organ swing, and Waller would go on to record two dozen pipe organ solos at the Camden studio, putting to use the talent on the instrument he had acquired--almost completely self-taught--from playing the theater organ to accompany vaudeville acts and during intermissions at Harlem's Lincoln Theater. None of his organ solos sold very well, however, and they would be rediscovered only many years later by grateful Waller fans.

The studio also had a Steinway grand, and on August 2, 1929, Waller led off his solo piano session with a tune he had written as the opening number for a revue called "Hot Chocolates" that had opened just a month earlier at New York's Hudson Theater. The piece was "Ain't Misbehavin'," and it was an instant show stopper with its inventive and catchy melody.

There would later arise a number of stories about how the song came to be written. As Waller's son, Maurice, later wrote, "Everyone seems to have his own 'true version' of how 'Ain't Misbehavin'' came into being": the most fanciful featured Waller knocking it out while serving a brief jail sentence for his failure to keep up with his alimony payments. What there was no doubt about was that the work was "a genuine masterpiece," in the words of Waller's biographer Paul S. Machlin. "Ain't Misbehavin'" would become one of the most recorded songs of the first half of the 20th century, with a half dozen hit recordings in the first six months alone. Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, Nat King Cole, and Teddy Wilson are among the more than 300 jazz and popular singers to record their versions in the years since.

A later Waller recording where he sings the song himself, with a small ensemble and his own piano accompaniment, has never gone out of print, and probably remains far better known than his 1929 piano solo. But it was in this earlier recording that Waller got to pull out all the stops of his stride technique, unconstrained by the boundaries of ensemble playing. Because Waller never wrote down more than a skeleton outline of his piano solos, it is also an irreplaceable historic record of the compositional improvisation that was the heart and soul of his genius as a musical composer. He elaborates the beautifully crafted melodic line of "Ain't Misbehavin'"--"sophisticated, yet simple and memorable at the same time," in Machlin's words--with increasing flights of melodic and harmonic invention, taking the tune apart and putting it back together, even "adding new material at unexpected places," imbuing the performance with a feeling of spontaneity and life that remain undimmed for all of the song's familiarity. (Part of Waller's impressive technique as a pianist was the amazing stretches of notes he could reach with one hand. His hands were so large, the blind pianist George Shearing once observed, that shaking hands with him was like "grabbing a bunch of bananas.")

The true part of the story about "Ain't Misbehavin'" and Waller's alimony troubles was that he was so strapped for cash that he sold the rights to all of the songs in "Hot Chocolates" for $500, a tiny fraction of what he would have earned in royalties from "Ain't Misbehavin'" alone had he held on to the rights. Waller's subsequent popular renown as a vocalist and entertainer led Victor to press him to crank out commercially appealing jazz-band treatments of hundreds of Tin Pan Alley standards rather than record any more of his own original solo piano works; the August 1929 session marked both the end and beginning of two distinct chapters of his all-too-short life as a performer and composer. But it was no coincidence that "Ain't Misbehavin'" was

the pivot that linked them together, the culmination of his compositional brilliance as a master of stride piano, and the launching point of a broader popular fame, that endures.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.