



FATS WALLER

THEATRE ORGANIST

by Dennis James

"Fats" was born on May 21, 1904 and christened Thomas Wright Waller. He grew up in a home where a great deal of hymn singing and Bible reading went on but in which there was no piano, that was too expensive a luxury for the Wallers to afford. Ed Kirkeby, who acted as Fats Waller's manager during the late 1930's and early 1940's, has related that when Thomas was very young he was found "running his fingers over the seats of two chairs which he had pushed together in the semblance of a keyboard — and it turned out that a woman upstairs had

allowed him to play her piano and aroused his curiosity."

By the time he was five he could play the harmonium, and a year later, when his brother Robert bought a piano — a Waters upright — into the house, Thomas and his sisters Naomi and Edith were given music lessons. But Thomas, who had already listened to ragtime pianists accompanying the silent films and heard this formal but lilting music drifting out of Harlem cellar clubs, found this conventional approach too tiresome.

He began to play by ear, and not

until several years later did he learn to read music. By then this liking for ragtime had become apparent to his father, who condemned that style of playing as "music from the Devil's workshop"; his mother, however, was much more tolerant and continued to help and encourage him throughout those early years.

In addition to acting as organist in his father's church, Thomas played the piano and organ at school concerts (he was attending Public School 89 in those days) and was a member of the students' orchestra. For a time he even

studied the violin and bass viol as well. Edgar Sampson, the well-known jazz arranger, was at school with Waller and has recalled how he would often inject a rhythmic note into his performances, inserting an off-beat here and there in the music.

When he was eleven his father, who still hoped the boy would enter the church as a minister, but who had meanwhile become proud of his son's musical accomplishments, took him to hear Paderewski perform at Carnegie Hall; an experience that only heightened Thomas' determination to become a professional musician.

During the next few years, he studied music under Carl Bohm (as he was to do later on with Leopold Godowsky) while continuing to attend DeWitt Clinton High School. His musical studies eventually began to clash with his school work, and when that happened Thomas – naturally enough – decided that music must come first.

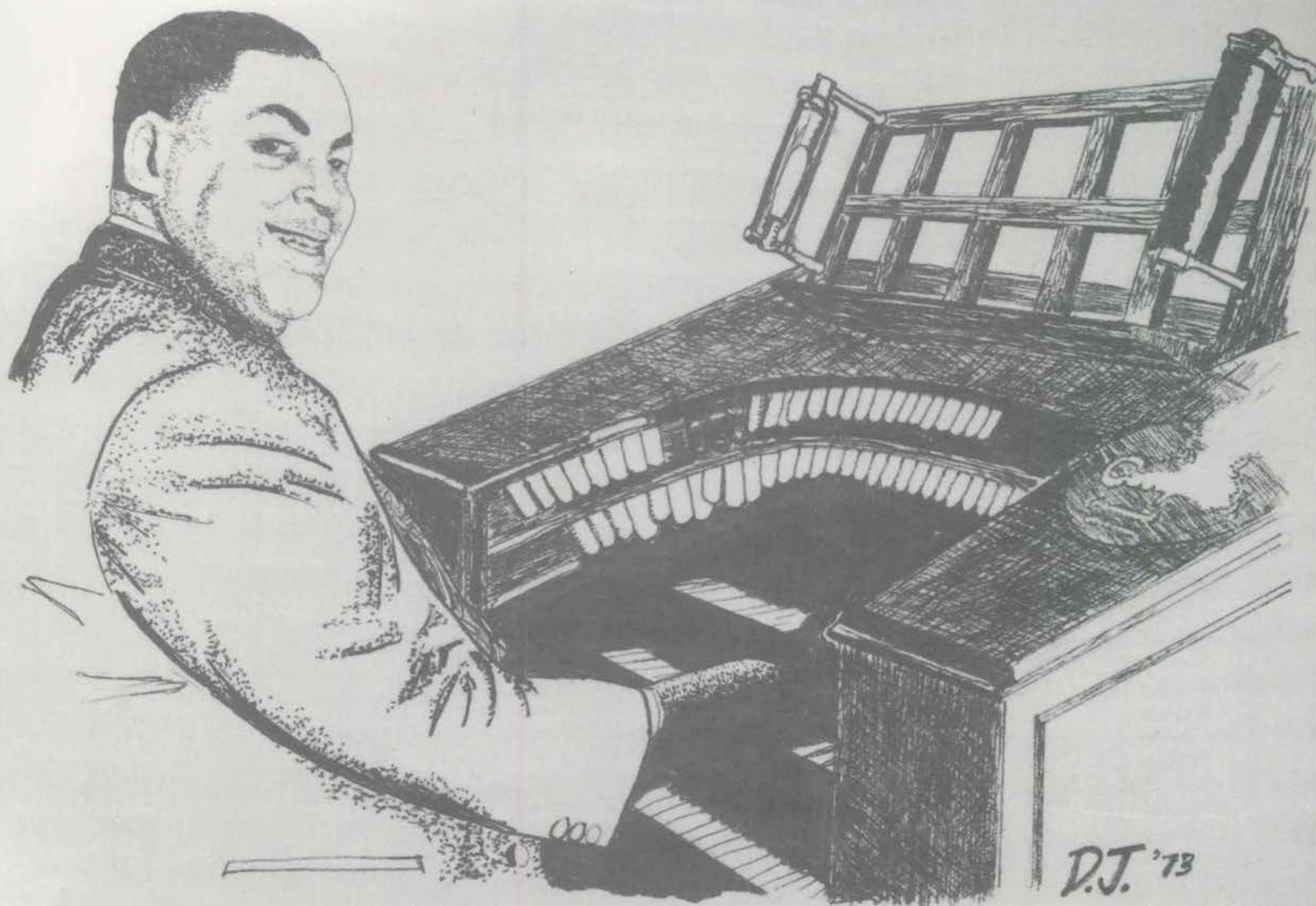
Jazz lovers the world over know and love "Fats" Waller as one of the greatest jazz pianists of all time. Little do they know that Fats was also a theatre organist. In fact, his public career began with his first appearances at the Wurlitzer theatre organ in his neighborhood movie house. Although his later piano stylings gained all of the public attention and created his enormous popularity, it was through the pipe organ that "Fats" found his greatest source of personal musical expression and satisfaction.

"There wasn't any rhythm for me in algebra," he declared some years afterwards.

Thomas Waller left DeWitt Clinton High School in the Spring of 1918. For a time he was employed in a jewel box factory, but he found work there too "dirty". Then he ran errands for Immerman's Delicatessen.

Quite close to the Waller home, stood the Lincoln Theatre, a cinema where films were shown to the accompaniment of music from a piano and pipe organ, the latter a Wurlitzer Grand that had cost the management

\$10,000. Even while he was still at school, Thomas made a habit of sitting in the front row of this theatre, just behind the pianist, Maizie Mullins, who allowed him to slide under the brass rail and to perch beside her on the piano stool. Then, if she felt like taking a rest, the boy would play instead. Soon the organist was allowing him similar privileges. He became so adept on the Wurlitzer, in fact, that when the organist fell ill Thomas deputized for him – at the wage of \$23 a week. By a useful coincidence the job suddenly became vacant, so



Thomas found himself installed as the Lincoln's regular organist, a position he held until the theatre changed hands several years later.

It was at the Lincoln Theatre that Count Basie (known in those days, quite simply, as Bill Basie) first heard him. "From then on," says Basie, "I was a regular customer, hanging on to his every note, sitting behind him all the time, fascinated by the ease with which his hands pounded the keys and his feet manipulated the pedals. He got used to seeing me, as though I were a part of the show. One day he asked me whether I played the organ. 'No,' I said, 'but I'd give my right arm to learn.' The next day he invited me to sit in the pit and start working the pedals. I sat on the floor watching his feet, and using my hands to imitate them. Then I sat beside him and he taught me.

One afternoon he pretended to have some urgent business downstairs and asked me to wait for him. I started playing while he stood downstairs listening. After that I would come to early shows and he let me play accompaniment to the picture. Later I used to follow him around wherever he played, listening and learning all the time."

Soon after this friendship had sprung up, Waller left the Lincoln Theatre for a few weeks to tour with a vaudeville show, playing the accompaniments for an act called "Liza and her Shufflin' Six". It was when he left this act that he recommended Bill Basie to take his place. "It was," recalls Basie, "my first trip on the road."

Back in New York once more, Thomas Waller began building up a small reputation, getting himself known as a pianist as well as an organist. Much of the credit for this must go to James P. Johnson. According to May Wright Johnson, the pianist's wife, "Right after James P. heard Fats Waller playing the pipe organ, he came home and told me, 'I know I can teach that boy.' Well, from then on it was one big headache for me. Fats was seventeen, and we lived on 140th Street, and Fats would bang on our piano till all hours of the night — sometimes two, three, four o'clock in the morning. I would say to him, 'Now go on home — or haven't you got a home?' But he'd come back every day and my husband would teach. Of course, you know the organ doesn't give you a left hand and that's what



A convivial group in Paris (1932). Left to right: Louis Coles, Ivan Browning, Grant Fisher, unidentified member of the Kentucky Singers, Fats Waller, Spencer Williams, Bricktop.
(Max Jones Photo)

James P. had to teach him."

By the middle of the 1920's Waller had achieved his first published composition, "Wild Cat Blues," a tune that was recorded by Clarence William's Blue Five, and had made his first broadcast — from the stage of the Fox Terminal Theatre in Newark, New Jersey, sometime in 1923. Meanwhile he continued to double as a cinema organist and a cabaret pianist. The Lincoln Theatre was sold, but Waller moved across to the Lafayette, where he not only received a higher wage but found himself playing a much larger organ.

The casual way in which he seems to have taken his duties as accompanist to the silent films can best be demonstrated by repeating an anecdote which Don Redman tells. At the time this incident occurred Redman was playing alto-saxophone with Fletcher Henderson's orchestra as well as writing many of its arrangements, and he had become very friendly with Thomas Waller, often dropping in to visit him during working hours at the Lafayette.

On one occasion Redman sat beside Waller, chatting away animatedly, while a newsreel was being screened above them. Thomas, he recalls, was playing "Squeeze Me," his own tune and one that he performed whenever he got the chance. Suddenly Redman happened to glance up and saw, to his horror, that a funeral procession was making its way across the screen. "Hey, Tom," he whispered, "they're showing a funeral. You shouldn't be playing that." "Why not?" exclaimed Waller, giving a diabolical grin and continuing to pound away at the keyboard. Then, beckoning to an usher, Waller handed him fifty cents

and asked him to slip out and get a pint of gin.

"The organ is the favorite instrument of Fats Waller's heart," wrote Ashton Stevens, the music critic of the *Chicago American*, "the piano only of his stomach." It was a true enough comment and one that Fats himself endorsed. "Well, I really love the organ," he once said. "I can get so much more color from it than the piano that it really sends me . . . And next to a grand organ there's nothing finer than a symphony orchestra."

What fascinated Fats Waller about the organ was its capacity to produce rich, colorful textures, as well as its sonority and depth of tone. These were qualities that, as far as the instrument would allow it, he also introduced into his piano playing. By far the most important characteristic of the 'stride piano' style which he and James P. Johnson created during the 1920's was the way it thickened the harmonies and extended the emotional scope of ragtime, giving that highly formal, rather brittle idiom something of the expressiveness to be found in the blues.

It should never be forgotten, however, that Fats Waller started out as an organist. What was more natural, therefore, that as soon as he began recording regularly under his own name he should choose to perform on the pipe organ? In the Autumn of 1926 he made two such recordings — "St. Louis Blues" and "Lenox Avenue Blues." During the following year he actually recorded no fewer than twenty-five organ solos, although only about half of them were ever issued.

J. Paul Chavanne contributes this anecdote concerning the Waller sessions for RCA Victor: "Fats had a



In England (1938)

(Duncan Schiedt Photo)

recording date in the Camden, New Jersey studio which was a converted church. As it was a sultry day, the church windows were open as Fats was working out on the studio organ, an Estey church instrument, before the session started. A couple of young men went walking by as the happy music floated out to the street. They stood there for a while and just couldn't believe their ears. Finally, one exclaimed to the other: 'Man, how can I join *that* church?'

One session for the Victor company found him playing versions of Rimsky-Korsakof's "Flight of the Bumble Bee," Bach's Fugues in B Minor and D Minor, Liszt's "Liebestraum," Moszkowski's "Spanish Dance No. 1" and Rudolph Friml's "Spanish Days". None of these recordings have been released, but it is believed that Waller first played each item in a legitimate fashion, then improvised upon it. In addition to accompanying two singers-Juanita Stinette Chappelle and Bert Howell — upon the organ, he also played the instrument on some band recordings with Thomas Morris' Hot Babies, blending very piquantly with the front-line trumpet and trombone. During 1926 and 1927 Fats also played both piano and organ on two sessions by Fletcher Henderson's orchestra. In 1928 he played in a session featuring James P. Johnson (Waller playing the organ, Johnson the piano) in a group called The Louisiana Sugar Babies.

In 1932 Waller visited Paris and a

famous story tells how Fats and the celebrated French organist, Marcel Dupre, clambered up to the organ loft of Notre-Dame cathedral. There, as Fats put it, "First he played on the God box, then I played on the God box." The French pianist, Eddie Bernard, who knew how partial Waller was to tongue-in-cheek humor, once asked noted French critic Panassie if the story was true. "Yes, Fats told me all about it the same evening. Marcel Dupre' invited him there," was the reply. "Unfortunately at the time it happened, Fats didn't inform me." After making a few investigations, however, Bernard eventually discovered that none of Waller's acquaintances in Paris had witnessed this incident at Notre-Dame.

He set out, therefore, to interview M. Dupre, then the organist at the Church of Saint Sulpice, and was admitted to the presence of Madame Dupré. "As soon as I mentioned the words 'Jazz Hot' (the jazz magazine for which Bernard was doing the inquiry) I had the feeling that I had offered a drink of whiskey to a Moslem." "Sir", said Mme Dupré, "my husband abhors jazz." After explaining why he had come, Bernard was told that between the years 1927 and 1937 M. Dupré had never set foot in Notre-Dame (he was not, it appears, on speaking terms with Louis Vierne, the organist there during that period) and Fats Waller had certainly never visited Saint Sulpice.

Louis Vierne had died in 1937, but Bernard managed to contact a friend of his, only to find that she too knew nothing about a meeting between either Dupré or Vierne and Fats Waller. At last Bernard called upon Pierre Cochereau, the present organist at Notre-Dame. Cochereau was charming. "Oh yes," he said, "Fats Waller *did* play on the Notre-Dame organ." But then it was discovered that the musician, Cochereau was thinking of, had actually been a white American, and that that incident took place in 1937.

Finally Bernard went back to Cochereau and begged him to search his memory for the name of the person who had told him about Waller playing the cathedral organ. "It was my assistant, Moreau," said Cochereau eventually. Eddie Bernard spoke to Moreau, who quickly answered: "Of course Fats Waller played on the Notre-Dame organ in 1932!" But when Moreau was asked how he knew this, he thought

hard for a moment, then replied: "I read it on the sleeve of a Fats Waller record."

Fats returned from France in the Autumn of 1932. One of the first things he did after landing in New York was to engage a manager, Phil Ponce, who promptly arranged for him to do a series of programs — Fats Waller's Rhythm Club — over radio station WLW at Cincinnati. It was while working on this show, incidentally, that the pianist first became known as "the harmful little armful." A student at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, Kay C. Thompson, who used to play the piano over WLW, remembers most vividly her first meeting with Fats: "As I was concluding the final number of one of my regular stints," she has written, "I chanced to look up, and there he was, making faces at me through the studio window . . . Instinctively I made faces in return. Such, then, were the beginnings of our friendship."

Fats Waller's Rhythm Club became so popular that it later toured as a vaudeville act on the RKO theatre circuit; yet Waller himself, so Miss Thompson avers, got far more satisfaction out of playing WLW's Wurlitzer organ on a late-night program, "Moon River". This program consisted entirely of classics, light classics and ballads, so Waller always performed on it anonymously, although his identity was occasionally betrayed by the embellishments he added to some of the compositions.

The manager of WLW, Paul Crosley Jr. had problems with Fats as related in *Cincinnati Magazine* of March, 1968: "Crosley's temper once cost him the greatest of all WLW stars, Fats Waller. Waller, who had a predilection for black derbies, cigars, and gin, also happened to be one of the greatest jazz pianists of all times. He particularly coveted an organ in the main studio of the radio station which Crosley had dedicated to his late mother. One night Crosley walked into the station and found Waller, in derby and cigar, playing one of his own compositions, "Ain't Misbehavin'," on the organ. Enraged, Crosley accused Waller of desecrating his mother's memory and fired him on the spot. Waller went on to greater things, but the organ never played right until one day a cleaning lady moved it out to dust and was deluged by empty gin bottles which rolled across the floor."

In the Summer of 1938 Fats travelled to England for a triumphant series of performances, including a two week appearance at the London Palladium. Noted jazz entrepreneur Leonard Feather approached H.M.V. (The English branch of RCA Victor) with a suggestion that Fats Waller should record with a pick-up group of British musicians. Tony Bernard Smith sends an account of these activities: "On August 21, 1938, Fats was commissioned to record with his 'Continental Rhythm.' This was a group of session musicians. Some of them really went out of their way to be present. The West Indian trumpeter, Dave Wilkins, travelled down from Glasgow and immediately after the session hurried off to Liverpool, where he was due to work with Ken 'Snakehips' Johnson's orchestra, while the trombonist, George Chisholm, became probably the first musician ever to interrupt a honeymoon for a recording date; he flew over from Jersey on the Sunday, then flew back again the following morning.



Chisholm later made a name for himself as a comic and as a comedy musician but he tells that he still thinks of himself as a jazz player. He remembers the session well: 'Fats did several sides using the piano and then he spotted the organ away in the corner of the studio and, you know, his eyes lit up. He decided then and there to do some of the numbers using the organ. This came completely out of the blue. Even when he was playing organ, he was exuding the essence of a jazz player. He took some absurd chances musically – and they all came up!'

"Waller came back to this organ a week later to do solos and accompany Adelaide Hall and again returned the following year to do two more numbers on the same organ. The organ was a 3/8 Compton plus Melotone. It was first installed in the Beaufort, Washwood Heath, Birmingham, in 1929, as a 2/8. However, not enough room was allowed for it when the theatre was built and it was removed to the studio with the addition of the third manual and Melotone unit in 1937. It was removed from the studio just a few years ago. With this number of ranks and general specifications, the organ was almost identical with the standard small instruments Compton was installing in British theatres during the 1930's. These were designed for short interludes rather than accompanying silent films.

"If you listen to Waller's first tracks you must be struck by his command of the instrument. Comptons are not like Wurlitzers or other U.S. makes. They are more unified, for one thing, and the Melotone would have been a new breed of cat to Fats. Other little jokers like double-touch cancel on the stop-tabs (too hefty a swipe to bring in a little extra oomph and you cancel out what you already have on that manual) and unfamiliar stop-descriptions would have inhibited most people, but here was Waller bashing away with all the familiar bounce and verve on very first acquaintance. It's a remarkable performance."

Fat's own enthusiasm is reflected in his recollections of the sessions quoted in Nat Hentoff's *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya*: "I'll never forget sitting down at the console of that magnificent organ in the H.M.V. studio on the outskirts of London. It reminded me of the Wurlitzer Grand I played at the Lincoln Theatre in Harlem when I was a

kid sixteen years old. I had myself a ball that afternoon, and the records really came easy."

Where playing jazz on the theatre organ is concerned, Fats remains completely unique; no one has come anywhere near equalling his authentic jazz stylings from that era. Perhaps he was helped by the fact that he possessed such enormous 'pedal extremities.' "To watch those twenty pound feet moving delicately and sensitively over the bass of the immense organ in the Paramount studios," writes Mezz Mezzrow, "was one of the most amazing sights imaginable." As James P. Johnson said shortly after Waller's death: "Some little people has music in them, but Fats, he was *all* music – and you know how big he was."

Happily, almost all of Fats' pipe organ recordings are now available on LP albums. These are all import items and should be available from any of the larger record stores around the country as special order items. Samples of his early solo work from the 1927 Camden Trinity Church studio recordings for Victor are to be found on the French RCA Victor Black and White Series, Volume 63, No. 741052 titled "*Fats Waller*" – *Young Fats at the Organ (1926 – 1927 – Volume 1)*. His ensemble work at the same studio is available in the same French RCA Victor Black and White Series, Volume 69, No. 741062 titled "*Fats Waller with Morris's Hot Babies (1927 – Volume 2)*". All of Fats' recordings on the Compton in the H.M.V. studios of London, England are available on a French album issued by the English recording company E.M.I. The recording front cover bears both the E.M.I. and Pathé labels – number 2-C154-04938/9, a two record set titled "*Fats in London (1938, 1939)*". Sole distributor in the U.S.A. Peters International, 600 Eighth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10018.

All of the foregoing biographical material was quoted directly from the outstanding biography "Fats Waller" by Charles Fox, published in England by Cassel & Co., Ltd. as No. 7 in a series called "Kings of Jazz." It is distributed in the United States by A.S. Barnes & Co., Inc. Other sources are credited as they appear. □

The "Fats" Waller Discography will be published in the April Issue.