

# FAT'S WALLER

FOR PIANO





# **SCOTT WALLER** **FOR PIANO**

AFRICAN RIPPLES	24
AIN'T MISBEHAVIN'	9
ALLIGATOR CRAWL	20
ALL THAT MEAT AND NO POTATOES	34
CLOTHES' LINE BALLET	36
HONEYSUCKLE ROSE	6
I AIN'T GOT NOBODY	58
I BELIEVE IN MIRACLES	56
I'M GONNA SIT RIGHT DOWN AND WRITE MYSELF A LETTER	46
I'M MORE THAN SATISFIED	40
I'VE GOT A FEELING I'M FALLING	12
THE JITTERBUG WALTZ	42
A LITTLE BIT INDEPENDENT	54
MY FATE IS IN YOUR HANDS	15
MY VERY GOOD FRIEND — THE MILKMAN	61
THE SPIDER AND THE FLY	18
SUGAR	50
VIPER'S DRAG	28
WHEN SOMEBODY THINKS YOU'RE WONDERFUL	68
WILD CAT BLUES	64
YOUR FEET'S TOO BIG	48

First Published 1978  
 This Edition 1989  
 Origins of Jazz Series  
 © International Music Publications

Exclusive Distributors  
 International Music Publications  
 Southend Road, Woodford Green,  
 Essex IG8 8HN, England.





## The Fats Waller story...

THOMAS WRIGHT WALLER was born in May 1904 – a big happy baby who grew into a fat happy boy and so was always called “Fats” by his school-friends. His parents disliked this nickname but were eventually forced to accept that this was what everybody was going to call him for the rest of his life. It certainly suited him more than the sedate, ‘Thomas’ which they preferred.

Fats’ father, EDWARD MARTIN WALLER, was born in Virginia. When he was young he had a severe stammer but, with great strength of mind, he gradually cured himself of this. Fats’ mother, ADELINE LOCKETT, was a very lively young woman and very religious, as was his father.

EDWARD WALLER did not want his children to be brought up in the South where there were no opportunities for them, and so he went to New York where he soon got a good job in a stables. He went back to fetch Adeline, they were married and both returned to New York where they first lived in Greenwich Village. Adeline was seventeen and Edward a couple of years older.

Their first child was born in 1890 but died in infancy – indeed, of the twelve children which were born to them, seven died in infancy. The survivors were Edward Lawrence and William Robert, born in 1891 and 1892. May Naomi was the first girl to survive, Thomas Wright (Fats) arrived in 1904 and the final child to be born was Edith Salome, born in 1910.

Fats and Naomi became inseparable; there was quite a gap between them and their two elder brothers and Edith was sent to Virginia to live with an aunt and seldom came home. The two children did not often play in the Harlem streets as their parents did not approve of the lives their neighbours lived and feared that the other children would have a bad influence on them. Each day in the Waller household began with readings from the Bible and all the children knew many passages from it by heart. Both Edward and Adeline took a great interest in the local Church life, Adeline was leading soloist in the Church Choir and played both organ and piano.

Fats was also interested in the piano and at the age of six pretended to play one on two chairs placed together. This interest persisted and eventually the whole family, together with several relatives, got together to buy one. However, as they had spent all their money buying the piano there was, at first, none left for piano lessons and Fats would sit for hours gazing at the keyboard, longing to play.

In church he would try to accompany the hymns on a small portable harmonium and eventually his parents arranged for him and his sister Naomi to have piano lessons, believing at that time that Naomi was the more musically gifted of the two. But the business of playing scales and exercises and learning the value of notes interested neither of them and Fats soon discovered the delights and difficulties of playing by ear – which was how he continued to play for a long time after the piano lessons had ended from lack of interest.

However, as he grew older he realised that he would have to learn to sight-read in order to play in the school orchestra. He had a few violin and string bass lessons but soon returned to the piano and began playing the music for morning assembly, as well as joining the school orchestra. His father hoped he would be a classical musician and took him to hear Paderewski play. Fats was enthralled by the performance and all his life had a great interest in, and knowledge of, classical music, particularly that of Bach, but his real preference was for popular music, to his parents’ distress.

He had a happy and protected childhood and when he was old enough did a few odd jobs in the neighbourhood but his only real interest was music. He spent all his free time at the local cinema, not watching the film but watching and listening to the pianist who accompanied the silent films of those days. Eventually he got to know the pianist, proved to her how well he could play and was allowed to take over while she took a break. When she fell ill he took her place for a couple of weeks and the audience greatly appreciated his playing. This led to his first real musical job – as organist at the cinema which was called the Lincoln Theatre. He played in the intervals but would also take over on the piano as often as he could.

Through his playing at the cinema he met several other musicians and was invited to join a small band. He also spent as many evenings as possible hanging about outside nightclubs, listening to the jazz musicians who played in them, learning as much as he could.

This happy period of his life lasted until 1920 when his mother died of diabetes and his cosy comfortable world was shattered. By this time his elder brothers were married with homes of their own and Fats felt uncomfortable living in the cold quiet house which had been so warm and full of love and life. He began living with the family of a friend, Wilson Brooks, in whose house he was delighted to find a player-piano, from which he tried to learn to play in the style of his idol, the famous James P. Johnson, whom he longed to meet. This was eventually arranged and Johnson was sufficiently impressed with young Fats’ playing to take him out that evening to the club he worked at – Leroy’s. There Fats really heard the blues for the first time and was enchanted, and next day he played blues on the organ at the Lincoln, much to the surprise of the patrons. James P. Johnson then introduced Fats to another of his great heroes, Willie ‘The Lion’ Smith who was also playing at Leroy’s. Johnson arranged for Fats to play and although Willie pretended not to be interested he eventually went over to Fats and told him he played ‘pretty good’, which was praise indeed for a sixteen year old from such a famous pianist.

Soon after this Fats, still feeling lonely after his mother's death remembered a pretty young girl he had met when he was playing with his first little band. Her name was Edith Hatchett and at the time he had taken her home to meet his mother and as she was a quiet gentle church-going girl, Adeline had approved of her and invited her often to the house. They had rather lost touch after Adeline died but now Fats looked her up again and a few weeks later they were married and went to live with Edith's family.

Fats soon began playing at 'parlour socials'. These were parties held in private houses, for which a small admission fee was charged to cover the music and dancing. Food and drink were sold at modest prices. Many great pianists began their playing life at these socials.

Then Willie 'The Lion' Smith walked out of the Leroy and Fats took his place. He also began making piano rolls which at that time was a very lucrative business. His first piano roll was called "GOT TO COOL MY DOGGIES NOW", and over the next few years he made many more and made a great deal of money out of them, which slipped straight through his fingers as it was to do all through his life.

Soon he was playing at parlour socials most nights and doubling at the Lincoln and the Leroy. His prodigious piano playing was only matched by his capacity for drink and already Edith was becoming uneasy and although young Thomas Waller Junior was born in that summer, 1921, things did not improve.

In 1922 Fats made his first record. It was called MUSSEL SHOALS BLUES and did fairly well and he followed it up by making several records accompanying a young singer called Sara Martin.

He had been writing and composing for some time now. He wrote very quickly, practically playing the pieces straight on to the piano, but up to now none had been published. He now started publishing numbers he had written, the first being WILDCAT BLUES. He was greatly helped in this new activity by Clarence Williams, a publisher and pianist, and over the five years they worked together Clarence accepted over seventy songs from Fats, although many of these were never published.

As Fats became more and more involved with the music world he was completely happy; as long as he had plenty to eat and drink he was content. But Edith was unhappy about his continual absences from home at the clubs and all-night parties he enjoyed so much. Eventually their marriage broke up with Edith keeping young Thomas and moving out. Fats agreed to pay a settlement for the keep of Edith and young Tom but for the rest of his life he was harrassed by this, eventually going to prison for non-payment of it.

But his life in music progressed smoothly. He formed a very fruitful song-writing partnership with Andy Razaf who wrote lyrics to Fats' music and used to sing the songs to demonstrate them to publishers while Fats played, until one day when Andy urged Fats to sing instead. The result was so encouraging that from then on Fats sang as well as playing piano. His partnership with Andy was carefree. They thought nothing of selling a song to one publisher and then taking a cab down the street and selling a variation of it to another publisher. They would sell the complete rights in a song for a very small amount when they needed money quickly. Occasionally they even made up the song on the piano as they sat in the publishers office.



Fats also collaborated with J. C. Johnson, Edgar Dowell and Spencer Williams and there are about five hundred published Fats Waller numbers as well as much written by him but not published under his name.

But while Fats was enjoying himself hurrying from publisher to publisher and playing and singing until the small hours, Edith's patience was becoming exhausted and finally she served an order on Fats to appear in court. He was very upset about this and refused to give in – he felt that he was working hard for hours every day making money only to have to pay much of it over to Edith since according to the settlement, the more he earned the more he had to pay. Luckily this time he got off lightly as his friends all gathered round to help him pay off what he owed.

But Fats was not meant to be alone for long, he always had a bevy of pretty glamorous girls round him, and soon he met Anita Rutherford. She was sixteen then and soon became his wife. Their son Maurice was born in 1927 when Anita was seventeen and this baby had only just been born when Edith came on the scene again and Fats was again arrested for non-payment of alimony. Again Fats refused to stick to the legal agreement he had made and once again his friends came to his rescue. But the following year he was not so lucky. By then the alimony he owed came to four figures, which was a large amount in those days and although his friends collected for him once again, this time they could not arrange things so swiftly and Fats was sent to jail. While he was in prison his father, Edward, died. Fats wanted to go to the funeral but he did not wish to go under police escort and so did not attend. Eventually the money was paid and he was released but from then on the Court kept in direct touch with him and received his payments and transferred them to Edith and young Thomas.

The following year, 1928, Fats' son Ronald was born and that year Fats made about 30 recordings and wrote the words and music for a new show called "LOAD OF COAL" – one of the songs being the eternally-loved HONEYSUCKLE ROSE. He soon began broadcasting in a big way too. He was originally booked for a thirteen-week series, three times a week, which was soon extended for another thirteen weeks, from which he went straight into another series. As he could not be seen while he was broadcasting Fats did not 'ham' quite as much as he did with great success in the clubs and began taking much more care with his singing.

The good life continued. Fats left Anita at home with the children and went to Paris with Spencer Williams who spent a great deal of his life there. After six weeks of continual night-clubbing both men were completely broke and had to wire home for the return fare. On his return Fats took on a manager called Phil Ponce who got him a two-year contract for a radio programme called "Fats Waller's Rhythm Club", which was extremely successful.

Then Ed Kirkeby took over as Manager and Fats' career proceeded even faster. When Ed took over Fats owed alimony to Edith, commission to Phil Ponce; he owed payments on his car, back taxes and fines levied on him by the Musicians Union. Gradually Ed straightened all this out for him and did his best to keep Fats out of trouble from then on.

By now the records which Fats was still continually making were selling in fantastic quantities – one of the most beguiling being the unforgettable "I'M GONNA SIT RIGHT DOWN AND WRITE MYSELF A LETTER", and Fats began appearing in films. His first, in 1935, was for RKO and was called "Hooray for Love". In it he played piano and sang two songs. In his next film he had a small part as well as singing and playing.

Then, in July 1938 came his first European tour. His first appearance was in Scotland where, at the Empire Theatre, Glasgow he wore a tartan Glengarry and dared to "swing" LOCH LOMOND. The Scots loved it and gave him ten curtain calls. He then went on to the London Palladium where he was even more successful. Fats was at his greatest, playing the Palladium, doubling with suburban theatres, doing four shows a night and in between playing at nightclubs in the West End until dawn. Whilst in London he made a record with HMV, recording FLAT FOOT FLOOGIE, MUSIC MAESTRO PLEASE and ATISKET ATASKET. The following week he again went to the HMV Studios and made six organ solos of beautiful spirituals.

From London he went to Denmark on the first part of his Scandinavian tour but after two weeks the tour was cut short by the threat of war and Fats decided he had better return to America. But before he did he returned once more to Britain and made his first ever television appearance for the B.B.C. Back in America he had a long and successful engagement at the Yacht Club in New York before returning again to London in 1939, when he composed his famous "LONDON SUITE" which he recorded immediately on an acetate. The LONDON SUITE was then recorded properly by EMI and a test pressing was made, but war prevented this being issued. The masters were destroyed in the blitz but a set of the original pressings was eventually found, almost by accident, in a music publishers office. So, twelve years late, the record was finally issued.

Fats returned to America for a series of one-night stands all over the country, which he continued up to 1942, working for many in an endeavor to pay off some of the debts which, with his happy-go-lucky attitude to money he could not help incurring. In 1943 he again went to Hollywood to appear, with great success, in the famous film "STORMY WEATHER".

He carried on appearing in clubs and at Army bases all over the U.S.A., travelling great distances to entertain the troops although, by then, he was not in very good health. He caught 'flu but refused to go to hospital and so doctors attended him at his hotel and persuaded him to stay in bed for a few days, but he was soon up carrying on with his dates, looking forward to spending Christmas with his family. On the train going home, on December 20th, he suddenly collapsed. The train was stopped at Kansas City and Ed Kirkeby hurried for a doctor but it was too late. Fats was dead. An autopsy found he had died of influenzal bronchial pneumonia, no doubt brought on by his refusal to stay in bed as advised by the doctors.

The crowds attending his funeral stopped the traffic for three blocks around the Church, and followed the funeral procession through the streets to the Fresh Pond Crematory on Long Island. The pall-bearers included his long-time friends, Andy Razaf, James P. Johnson and Clarence Williams.

Fats is remembered by many people who have no interest in jazz for his colourful personality and great zest for life. He is remembered by others as a great pianist, comedian and showman, and by still others by the legacy of great artists descended from his style of playing, such as Art Tatum and Count Basie. But he is, perhaps, remembered most of all for the marvellous songs he created – HONEYSUCKLE ROSE, AINT MISBEHAVIN', I'VE GOT A FEELING I'M FALLING, BLUE TURNING GREY OVER YOU.

He was, perhaps, never allowed to give of his best on radio or at concerts where his admirers wanted him merely to entertain them and it is those who were privileged to hear him at private parties who probably knew, and treasure, the best of Fats.



