Smith, Johnson, and Waller:  
The Birth of Stride Piano

and

Three Piece for Piano:  
My Sometimes Lover  
Camden Catch  
J’s Meadow

by

Nicholas Pappadopoulos  
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To
JAY HOGGARD

FOR SHOWING ME A NEW WORLD

AND
NED CLAFLIN

FOR PUSHING ME THROUGH THE DOOR

THANK YOU BOTH
I look at the piano and hear beauty. I’m lucky. When I listen to recordings of jazz pianists from the early 20th century, I feel connected to something that I can never be a part of. That is a time I will never know first hand — only through books and recordings and the occasional fortunate encounter with a straggler from the era. But the 1920s existed, from the prohibition, the peak of ragtime, and stride piano to the Great Depression, the birth of the recording industry, player pianos, and the Great Migration to Harlem, New York. My intention with this paper is to describe the evolution of Harlem stride piano in the 1920s — its origins, key players, and resounding impact on all forms of jazz to follow. My curiosity in stride was awakened when I heard Thomas ‘Fats’ Waller’s Viper’s Drag nearly two years ago. This is one man at a piano playing music that makes me want to sing and dance and, most importantly, play the piano with limitless skill and joy — this, to me, was the piano reborn with harmony brilliance and percussive attack and rhythm. It is a technique of complex rhythmic and harmonic interplay, personal expression, virtuosic technique, and showmanship. That level of artistry and sound was not an accident. Stride piano has a rich history and intentionality that I explored in my search for more of Waller’s music. In those albums and liner notes I met masters of the style — James P. Johnson, Willie ‘the Lion’ Smith, Luckey Roberts, Donald ‘the Lamb’ Lambert — all
possessing prodigious skill, ingenuity, and a host of lively stories. Above all, they were entertaining the crowd and enjoying what they did. In the past few years of my own practicing and playing, I lost that enjoyment and my sound became anxious and hesitant. I forgot to smile. Len Lyons’s book *Jazz Portraits* opens with the inscription “for Louis E. Siagel, who taught me the most important lesson of the piano: how to enjoy it.” And that’s what these men, from eighty years ago, gave back to me in their stories and recordings. The audible shouts and witty asides of the pianist during his dextrous playing combined showmanship with mastery. I loved the sense of comradry I felt among the musicians in their stories. I laughed at the banter and tried to comprehend where the music came from. This, of course, was worth looking into.

The barebones of stride consist of a left hand ‘striding’ across the lower half of the keyboard; the pianist strikes low on the first and third beats while beats two and four are closer to middle C. The lower beats can be one note, an octave, or a tenth while the upper beats are usually a form of the major triad with an added 6th or 7th for a fuller sound. These weaker beats are usually a three- or four-note chord always voiced in closed position and at least an octave above the stronger beats\(^1\) While the left hand lays this groundwork, the right hand provides the melody, variations, and improvisations. The left hand, though, is the power of

stride — it propels the rhythm, drives the harmony, and keeps a steady pulse throughout the entire piece. The consistent pulse is essential to stride as players routinely played to rooms full of dancing party-goers. The intention of stride was to recreate the sound of a full orchestra: the powerful left-hand bass acts as the percussive rhythm section and the right hand provides the thickly textured melody.² Because of this self-sufficient sound, stride players were never accompanied — rather, they worked performed solo or accompanied singers and other instrumentalists in support. Adding drums in support of the stride would be like a bass accompanying a bass; drums are, by nature of the stride’s percussive left hand, not only redundant but distort the effect by muddying the intricacies of the pianist’s left- and right-hand interchanges.³ This solo piano style dominated the New York music scene for a decade. The style was achieved through the synthesis of four elements — ragtime, the blues, ‘shout dances,’ and pianistic virtuosity.⁴

Black pianists were the progenitors of both stride and its predecessor Ragtime. The ragtime piano style was prominent during the very end of the 19th century until, roughly, 1920. These black pianists blended two very different musical elements to create the first form of truly American music. Drawing on European classical harmonies and incorporating syncopation of music derived

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² Brown, 84
³ Fell, John and Vinding, Terkild. Stride!. Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 1999. 44
⁴ Brown, 119
from African music — which had survived over the years via minstrel music and dance steps\(^5\) — this music was considered an unsavory union by much of the population and so the music and its composer-performers were relegated to playing the whorehouses and saloons.\(^6\) Ragtime was heavily associated with dance steps that were considered risqué (with such intriguing names as the ‘slow drag’, the ‘dude walk’, ‘balling the jack’, and ‘stop time’) that raised middle class suspicions of the new music; despite this paranoia and a failure to penetrate the conservative middle class, ragtime planted deep roots in the American music scene.\(^7\) Despite these negative connotations with ragtime, the style was also practiced and performed by members of high society and played with a seriousness befitting its significant in the history of American music. Ragtime’s rise to fame owes much to Scott Joplin, who became the preeminent composer of the style. Joplin’s renowned piece *The Maple Leaf Rag* epitomized ragtime’s syncopation and sound. Becoming the first instrumental piece to sell over a million copies of sheet music, *The Maple Leaf Rag* was the prototype of classic ragtime.\(^8\) Classic ragtime is thoroughly composed music and the most well-known form of ragtime — all its elements, the harmony, melody, and rhythm, are worked out in advance and notated precisely.\(^9\)


\(^{6}\) Calabrese and Waller, 25

\(^{7}\) Fell and Vinding, 9

\(^{8}\) Brown, 37

\(^{9}\) Brown 41
Pianists at the turn of the century began to reevaluate the structure of ragtime as the modern age allowed for the transfer of musical ideas across the world; these men were expanding the limits of ragtime harmonically, rhythmically, and melodically.\textsuperscript{10} The most striking quality of ragtime is its rhythm — the steady, even beat is maintained in the left hand while the syncopated melody in the right creates the trademark tension.\textsuperscript{11} This pre-composed ragtime had a direct influence on stride piano, most notably in its rhythms. Based on the structural pattern of the left hand and consistent pulse, early stride pianists began composing their own tunes that introduced — in addition to more complex harmonies throughout the piece — melodic material in the left-hand rather than the disjointed bass notes of ragtime.\textsuperscript{12} So, the four beats of the stride left hand resemble the ‘oom-pah’ (oom-pah, oom-pah, one, two, three, four) of ragtime only in their positioning and alternation on the keyboard.\textsuperscript{13} Ragtime bass notes (on beats one and three) were usually voiced higher and stressed alternating roots and fifths of chords — the style lacked the melodic contour that was being developed by stride.\textsuperscript{14} In addition to melodic consideration, stride players often enlarged the intervals on beats one and three from octaves and sixths to tenths and

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\textsuperscript{10} Brown, 49  \\
\textsuperscript{11} Brown, 46  \\
\textsuperscript{12} Fell and Vinding, xv  \\
\textsuperscript{13} Fell and Vinding, 45  \\
\textsuperscript{14} Brown, 121
\end{flushleft}
added a third pitch in between the outer two — this helped emphasize the harmony on the strong beats and keep a consistent texture.\textsuperscript{15}

Hitting a unbroken tenth on a keyboard, especially when combined with inner notes at a prodigious speed, is tricky for most and impossible for some. The simple size of one’s hand separates the two. As of recently, I can manage most tenths with reasonable speed — this is to my surprise as I couldn’t do this a year ago, but the span of my hand stretched as I stressed and reached during practice. My own teacher, who can reach the so-called ‘big tenths’ (those between notes B flat and D, B and D sharp, and likewise spacing) explained as much to me; he learned to stretch his hand by running parallel tenths up and down the scales with his left hand. Based on hand-size, stride pianists developed their own techniques — even those with enormous hands (such as Fats Waller and Luckey Roberts) used broken tenths and rolled chords as this technique can provide a sense of surging forward momentum and swing.\textsuperscript{16} Hearing their rolls and percussive broken tenths on recordings gave me a sense of relief while I’d pondered the stretch of my own two mitts. A few of history’s pianists are notorious for their mammoth hands — Liszt and Rachmaninoff come to mind. Leading the pack, however, was stride pianist Luckey Robert, who could reach an interval of a 14th (just shy of two octaves) at the unexpected height of four foot ten inches.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} Machlin, Paul S. \textit{Stride: The Music of Fats Waller}. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985. 8
\textsuperscript{16} Machlin, 8
\textsuperscript{17} Gioia, Ted. \textit{The History of Jazz}. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. 9
Ragtime bass chords (on offbeats two and four) tended to be formed from the basic triad in question. But inventive ragtime players began incorporating a wider variety of sonorities (with sevenths, ninths, and sixths) that allowed subtle changes in harmonic expression classic to the stride style. The harmonic texture of both hands increased while the rhythm became looser and emphasized a swinging, pulsing drive. These new rhythms were found in another foundation of the black community — the church.

These pianists developed a style vitally influenced by what were known as ‘ring shouts.’ These ‘shouts’ were a form of dancing in black churches where the communion linked arms and shuffled around in a circle with increasing speed and emotion while singing hymns as they turned. They were very rhythmic, emotionally intense dances nearly hypnotic in their effect. Pianists of the late ragtime generation, in fact, called the new style ‘shout’ style before the term ‘stride’ was introduced. As, “the heart and soul of stride piano derives from the rhythms of the shout dances,” the focus of the stride players was on developing rhythmic ideas and motifs rather than creating highly advanced melodic lines.

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18 Machlin, 8
19 Machlin, 12
21 Brown, 15
22 Brown, 15
23 Brown, 127
Though the rhythm and intensity of stride is chiefly born from the ring-shouts, blues music influenced stride through its power of personal expression.

Like the shout dances, the blues rely heavily on the ‘call-and-response’ pattern — usually a two bar phrase is ‘called’ out followed by a ‘response’ of similar duration. It is a musical style of incredible individuality and emotional display.

“The blues takes its shape and style during the performance. It is the personal creation of the individual, reflecting his response to a particular situation...its expressive range is limited only by the emotional intensity of the performer.”

Despite its heavy-hearted name, the blues and its performers often produce upbeat songs using humor and innuendo. Stride players drew from this jocular side of the blues in their displays of showmanship and lyricism, as noted later in the approach of Thomas Waller.

Combining ragtime, religious shouts, and elements of the blues is not enough to create a new musical style at the piano. Contributing to the creation of stride above all, in my mind, was the sheer technical ability of these players. Stride playing required complete independence of coordination between the hands at incredible speeds without interruption or rest. Complex chords and harmonies were mandatory in the execution of the the style. In addition, players were

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24 Brown, 61
expected to be able to play in any key so as to accompany vocalists — these pianists practiced for hours on end ‘woodshedding’ tunes they’d heard; they’d play the piece in every key and work with substitute chord voicings and harmonies.\(^{25}\) The competition among stride pianists was fierce and expected; as discussed later, this competitive nature manifested itself in ‘cutting’ contests where players tried to outdo one another in displays of technical precision and flair.

Stride is, at base, ragtime evolved. Stride pianists use richer harmonies and textures combined with chromatic chord progressions that are not employed in ragtime. The right-hand melodies are more more chromatic and improvisatory in their inclusion of blues-related motifs; stride music is robust, complex, and relentlessly fast-paced.\(^{26}\) And the players themselves were the same.

Stride was a style born and played around Harlem — the style is commonly referred to as the Harlem stride. New York City, the heart of the music publishing industry, was the proving ground for pianists; they tested their skills against one another.\(^{27}\) The term ‘tickler’ became synonymous with a stride-pianist during the 1920s. It is short for ‘ivory-tickler’ and used often by James P. Johnson to describe himself and his peers — it was a term of honor.\(^{28}\) In addition to

\(^{25}\) Brown, 87
\(^{28}\) Fell and Vinding, 29
describing how they handled the piano, it was an innuendo to how they handled women and, in particular, prostitutes.\textsuperscript{29} Many stride pianists were itinerants, moving outside of New York to different cities in search of work. Unless they were very well-known or held a steady gig at a club, ticklers did not make much money nor have a steady income in their line of work; some players worked as pimps or pool hustlers to supplement their income.\textsuperscript{30} The majority of stride pianists, however, found work in clubs or at private parties. These gatherings were a way for an apartment-dweller to supplement his own income if he was falling behind on the rent. The owner of the apartment provided food, booze, and entertainment and a small fee was charged to the party-goers at the door. These entrance fees covered the cost of the party and provided the renter with next month dues — hence, a ‘rent party.’ Or, to cover the bases, “Chittlin’ Struts, Gumbo Suppoers, Fish Fries, Egg Nog Parties, Parlor Socials, Buffet Flats, and Rent Parties.”\textsuperscript{31}

The main entertainment and draw at these rent parties was the piano — the renter hired out two or three stride pianists to play through the night while everyone danced and socialized. Harlem, in the years following the beginning of World War I, saw a vast demographic shift — the black population surged as southern migrants joined the Manhattan-dwellers that left the overcrowded

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\textsuperscript{29} Brown, 23  \\
\textsuperscript{30} Fell and Vinding, 71  \\
\textsuperscript{31} Brown, 165
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midtown apartments for Harlem. Harlem witnessed a rise in black control — and black aspirations for independent art forms and cultural achievement — due to the boom in black property ownership. But still, low salaries and increasing rent persisted, presenting a darker reality a less hopeful future.

“Jazz was very much a part of this second Harlem — more at home here than in the ‘other’ Harlem of high culture and higher aspirations. True, the Harlem Renaissance created an ideology, a cultural context for jazz. But the Harlem of rent parties and underground economies created music. Even before the onset of the Great Depression, the rent party had become established as an accepted way of paying for the high cost of lodging...admission on the night of the party might cost anywhere between twenty-five cents and a dollar. The money would pay for both the cost of the party and the next month’s rent.”

The piano was at the heart of this split between two very different black artistic futures as the instrument offered such conflicting opportunities — either as a way to join traditional sophisticated culture or a way to delve into the rowdy nightlife. Somewhere in between these two extremes lay the path for simply making a living at the piano, without the concern of a historical impact. The rent party was a combination of all three — complete with bounding creative impulse, drinking and gambling, and pianists trying to earn enough money to get by. It was

32 Gioia, 94
33 Gioia, 94
34 Gioia, 95
a form of mass cultural expression that grew from the physical and cultural displacement of black Americans. These parties were the prevalent form of household entertainment in Harlem for middle- to lower-class throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s.

The pianist’s responsibility at these parties was to provide music that sounded continuously as to facilitate constant dancing. Any music that the crowd couldn’t dance to was thrown out and a new pianist stepped in. Naturally, competition sprung up among the pianists as to who would get the gigs and play the parties. The crowd, in this way, acted as judge — players took turns trying to outplay each other with their new tricks and best songs while the crowd danced and decided on the best player of the night. These performance situations were referred to as ‘cutting contests’ — each pianist would try to trump the previous player in complexity and finesse. As a result of this cultivation of such personal technique, each player developed his own trademark style. Since such technical ability and inventiveness was constantly called for during these contests, players played extensively and practicing ferociously. Naturally, each player improved with practice and began developing new ideas and complicated techniques that helped advance the progress of stride. The solo nature of the piano made this all

35 Brown, 165
36 Machlin, 9
37 Dicaire, 60
38 Machlin 10
39 Machlin, 10
the more possible. The piano’s self-sufficiency allows for its practicers to student, experiment, and perform alone\textsuperscript{40}; this, of course, all for the pianist’s to work out their tricks before challenging the room. All of this rivalry led to a constant interchange between musicians, players listening and copying each other trying to keep themselves in the game. These competitive yet, usually, friendly sessions have remained a staple of jazz pedagogy and practice, in the form of cutting contests, jam sessions, and trading fours.\textsuperscript{41}

The music wasn’t the only part of the competition, though. The pianist’s whole ensemble was taken into account — his attitude, attire, humor, and wit. The visual was just as important to the stride pianist as his music. Willie ‘the Lion’ Smith (born in 1893 as the notable William Henry Joseph Bonaparte Bertholoff Smith) was one of the real proponents of this all-encompassing notion of what being a tickler really meant. He combined delicate melodies over innovate harmonies and strong rhythms\textsuperscript{42} with a stylized outfit — a cigar, a rakishly tipped hat, and an impeccable suit accompanying nearly every photograph. His dignified demeanor and polished behavior prompted James P. Johnson, another master of the style, to comment that Smith’s, “every move was a picture.”\textsuperscript{43} This appropriation of technique and emphasis on presentation were strategies that

\textsuperscript{40} Lyons, 15
\textsuperscript{41} Gioia, 98
\textsuperscript{43} Lyons, 24
Smith learned from the older generation of ragtime players. Indeed, Smith, at age 14, heard the legendary pianist Jelly Roll Morton in 1911 — the experience greatly influenced Smith’s later attention to performance and showmanship. The stride pianists were entertainers at heart, and they performed the part with gusto. The notions of artistic integrity developed by later generations would only have amused these players — no stride player felt that the pressures of presentation and showmanship would detract from his performance. But the musical integrity was never compromised by the visual components. These players, knowing their trade was difficult and competitive, were always sharpening their technical ability. Professionalism was still a requisite for these players — this mastery of style, both on and off the keyboard, helped expand the audience of this black music across the race and economic divides.

Willie ‘the Lion’ Smith and his generation of pianists created stride with the development of their early ragtime years. Among these men, James P. Johnson emerged as one of the true giants of stride. Smith and Johnson championed the new style, outplaying others at rent parties and leading the pack in harmonic and rhythmic development. Johnson, born in New Brunswick, New Jersey in 1894 (only a few months after Smith), moved with his family to midtown Manhattan at

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\begin{itemize}
  \item [44] Fell and Vinding, 109
  \item [46] Fell and Vinding, 66
  \item [47] Gioia, 96
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a young age. He grew up listening to itinerant ragtime piano players as they passed through Manhattan. His career as a pianist began at seventeen during his high school vacations — he played at a derelict brothel and bar near Coney Island in Far Rockaway, New York. Later, he emphasized the direct link between his own compositions and the dance performances at these unscrupulous establishments — often variations that copied more formal dance patterns. In addition to these dances, Johnson studied the works of Scott Joplin and began to move past the boundaries that had been established in ragtime. Johnson was able to do this because, in addition to hearing a wide collection of pianists from such a young age, he had surpassed Joplin as a musician. As a performer, Johnson was considered by his peers to be the best player of his generation in the stride style. By 1920 he was acknowledged as such and his skills were constantly in high demand at parties throughout Harlem and Manhattan. A musician had much greater social relevance during this era — before radio, television, and widespread recording, musicians were a staple of household entertainment. Johnson spoke of his draw as a youth to the tickler lifestyle,

48 Fell and Vinding, 93
49 Fell and Vinding, 27
50 Fell and Vinding, 27
51 Dicaire, 63
52 Brown, 8
53 Dicaire, 60
“They were popular fellows, real celebrities. They had lots of girl friends, led a sporting life and were invited everywhere there was a piano. I thought it was a fine way to live, just as later kids would think singers like Crosby and Sinatra were worth copying.”

Johnson achieve fame and a steady income during his life as a pianist. In his younger years, he worked himself ragged learning solid technique and built a foundation for his later achievements. Johnson had a particular infatuation with the classical piano style and the virtuosos at the turn-of-the-century — the style of such gifted players as Joseph Lhevinne and Josef Hofmann prompted Johnson to practice with mittens on in the hope of learning a soft touch. Stride’s prodigious speed leaves little time for hand-eye coordination; the hands must know the piano well enough to land precisely on every attack. Johnson attempted to learn this skill early on by draping a sheet over the keyboard or working in the dark so as to make his connection more innate.

Johnson’s technique set the standard that other ticklers were expected to match — through the study of classical piano harmony and counterpoint, Johnson developed a superb, streamlined technique. In addition to the classical virtuosi such as Hoffman and Rachmaninoff, he studied the techniques of the older ragtime players that were beginning to change their sound — men like Eubie

54 Davin, Tom. “Conversations with James P. Johnson,” Jazz Review (June 1959), 16
55 Fell and Vinding, 94
56 Doerschuk, 13
57 Lyons and Perlow, 307
Blake, Luckey Roberts, and Abba Labba.\textsuperscript{58} Johnson’s melodic lines had a vocal quality and emotional character that was adopted from the blues-style; he used riffs, call-and-response patterns, and even clusters to approximate the quarter-tone changes of horn players.\textsuperscript{59} His compositional philosophy took characteristics from the shouts he heard during church, the dance halls of midtown Manhattan, and the new sounds he heard during cutting contests at the rent parties.\textsuperscript{60} It was Johnson who took the “power of the blues, the novelty of ragtime, and the structure of classical to create”\textsuperscript{61} the power of stride, but it was one of his students who took the style it to its greatest heights. Under the guidance and direct reaching of Johnson, Thomas ‘Fats’ Waller completed the triumvirate of preeminent Harlem stride players — Smith, Johnson, and Waller.\textsuperscript{62}

Thomas Waller lived a full life in his short thirty-nine years. He was one to joke often, drink in excess, and play the piano with an incredibly nimble touch in spite of his ample frame. The stories, often outrageous and implausible, that persist while discussing his life often overshadowed his genius.

Part of the reason for this dearth of critical study lies, I suspect, in the persistent myths surrounding Waller’s life — myths that magnify his affinity and capacity for high living.

\textsuperscript{58} Doers, 13
\textsuperscript{59} Brown, 68
\textsuperscript{60} Brown, 21
\textsuperscript{61} Dicaire, 62
\textsuperscript{62} Brown, 142
his conviviality, his ebullient personality, and his supposed disinclination to take his music seriously.\textsuperscript{63}

I’d be hard-pressed to watch a video or hear a recording of Waller’s and not break into a wide grin. His voice-overs throughout his playing, full of witty banter and innuendo, give the impression that he was hardly concerned with how he sounded — but it would be impossible to execute the style he created or produce such a vast body of work without a serious understanding and interest in piano technique.

Waller was first introduced to music through the church where his father was a minister; his mother was a skilled pianist who played the organ during church services.\textsuperscript{64} Waller took a keen interest in the piano and the organ at a young age and played whenever and wherever he could. When he turned fourteen, Waller quit high school to search for a way into the world of Harlem pianists. A year later, he became the official organist for the Lincoln Theatre; it was here he could practice diligently and gain serious experience playing for an audience.\textsuperscript{65} During his time playing in churches and at the theaters, Waller became invested in the classical European piano repertoire. His favorite’s were Bach, Lizst, and Chopin — the ideas of these masters are scattered throughout Waller’s

\textsuperscript{63} Machlin, vii
\textsuperscript{64} Dicaire, 105
\textsuperscript{65} Dicaire, 105
compositions. But he also found himself drawn towards the piano sounds of the Harlem nightlife. Waller practiced in both styles diligently during this time. Like many other aspiring pianists, he learned how to play the popular ragtime and stride pieces of the day not through sheet music, but from piano rolls.

A piano roll is an entirely mechanical process of recording without any of the electronic means we employ today. A roll of paper is literally pulled over rows of hammers that correspond to the notes on the piano. This mechanism was designed to fit into specially made upright pianos for the express purpose of cutting rolls. As the pianist players, the hammers mark the paper with indentations that denote both pitch and duration. Later, a technician cuts the notched marks to create the master copy that is later used for mass production. In These rolls can be played back on ‘player pianos’ that are equipped with a pneumatic mechanism that can play back the perforated paper roll — as the roll turns, the small holes are caught by levers that in turn depress the keys, forcing the hammers to strike the strings.

I grew up practicing on a beat-up player piano from the 1920s. My uncle’s grandfather bought it nearly eighty years ago and it eventually found its way into our living room. I remember folding out the foot petals and pushing them down in counter action as fast as possible — I watched the keys dip and rise at staggering speed by way of some invisible master. Eventually the roll would

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66 Dicaire, 106
67 Fell and Vinding, 143
68 Brown, 89
end in a flourish of arpeggios that could only have been played with four hands and I’d flip the switch from ‘play’ to ‘rewind’ and zip the roll back to the beginning. The small metal hook would always unlatch itself from the mechanism and spin a dozen times on momentum alone, flapping against the wood with decreasing strength. I could run through the roll slowly or vary the tempo as I pleased. This, of course, is the ultimate advantage to learning a piece from a roll — the roll can be slowed down without distorting the music in pitch. Many stride pianists learned a piece’s notes by moving the roll slowly through each passage, placing their hands over the keys as the mechanism depressed them. Waller learned Johnson’s *Carolina Shout* from a roll in this way; it was one of the most popular pieces at the time, often used as a standard for cutting competitions. Of course, a piano roll is no substitution for the live musician nor a truly accurate recording of their style. A roll can only provide the notes and the voicings of the performance. They’re the mechanical version of a MIDI performance, something like interactive sheet music. The paper cannot capture attack and dynamics nor contouring and tone — which are all crucial distinctions in a performer’s personal style. The roll fails to convey the emotional delivery and nuance of a live performance or the exactness of a digital recording. Yet the connection to the past is still there — if I could ever get my hands on a roll of

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69 Brown, 141
70 Fell and Vinding, 143
71 Brown, 90
Carolina Shout, I could learn the piece in the same tedious yet exhilarating mimicry of the ticklers. Much music was learned, though, by ear. The popularizing of concepts as ‘guitar-tabs’ and the accessibility to stripped down arrangements of popular music has made my generation’s musicians much weaker in the ear. There’s always another avenue to learning a piece than by listening attentively at the radio — I debate whether this is an improvement made possible by technology or the short-changing of an elemental part in the development of a well-rounded musician. The stride pianists needed fantastic ears if they planned to copy each other’s tricks or learn new techniques and phrasing. Meanwhile, the man at the keys is trying to dazzle with complexity and speed that trips up the listener, who certainly won’t be interrupting with a question, “Could you play that last part again?”

After he learned Carolina Shout with the help of a player piano, Waller met Johnson and the two formed a student-teach bond and a lifelong friendship. Johnson, ten years older and the undisputed master of the style, began teaching Waller the complexity of stride that built on his basic knowledge from working closely piano rolls. Johnson proved to be a well-matched teacher to a rapidly advancing student — Waller was beginning to shine. His work at the Lincoln Theater allowed him a life audience, which provided him the opportunity to begin constructing his stage persona and renowned humor. He eventually moved from

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72 Machlin, 3
73 Machlin, 3
the Lincoln Theater to the nearby Lafayette Theater where he continued to accompany silent films that required improvisation; these engagements called for constant creative material — Waller excelled. By 1924, at age 20, Waller was well-known throughout Harlem for his playing; he was a highly desirably player on the rent-party circuit and his piano rolls were widely popular. He went on to improvise more sophisticated and intricate melodies than any of his predecessors — he matched the same intensity and speed of his fellow players, but managed to perform with a light touch that defied the strenuous demands of the style.

Stride playing reached its climax in the playing of Thomas Waller. His propulsive left hand and playful melodic material personified the stride style; his playing went on to influence such jazz figures as Count Basie, Duke Ellington, and Art Tatum. Waller’s elaborate yet technically clean playing was stylized and confident yet seldom pretentious. Waller’s pianistic technique, however, was not his only form of entertainment; he’s often remembered more vividly for the rest of his act. Waller was a showman at heart and took his presentation to great heights. In conjunction with his polished playing, he gave the audience a visual and verbal act that brought the listener through moments of suspense, sadness, and great

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74 Machlin, 11
75 Calabrese and Waller, 55
76 Lyons, 26
77 Lyons and Perlow, 522
78 Doerschuk, 19
Waller knew that showmanship was more than just his piano proficiency — his talents encompassed songwriting, recording, accompanying, and radio broadcasting. Doers notes that Waller’s work on the radio — with his improvised jokes, campy yet talented singing, and fluid piano playing — became, “part of the soundtrack for the era.” Waller went on to write hundreds of tunes for the piano and many songs for theater productions. Many of his works (‘Ain’t Misbehavin’, ‘Honeysuckle Rose’, ‘Black and Blue’) became jazz standards that remain popular into the 21st century.

I listened to a great deal of Waller’s compositions and recordings, but *Viper’s Drag* remains very much with me. The piece opens with a dark, percussive theme in D minor (with a shout-out to Grieg), and then moves into a wonderfully jaunty stride in E-flat major. The opening theme returns but fades away into a brilliant run through the expanse of the piano in D major. I’ve always felt a fantastic range of emotional response while listening to this piece — savageness, nostalgia, joy, exhilaration, humor. The piece feels self-referential to Waller — his life was quite turbulent with overdue alimony payments, excessive drinking, demanding tour schedules, endless stretched of late nights, and the complications of fame. He was impulsive by nature and had a constant need for money to support his lifestyle; on more than a few occasions he sold his own

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79 Dicaire, 109  
81 Doerschuk, 20
pieces outright for small sums of cash. Yet many of the stories I read reveal a man who loved what he did and enjoyed his life immensely. On my recording, Waller plays the roughness of *Viper’s Drag* with a seemingly impossible light-heartedness — as if acknowledging the troubles of life with a shrug and a smile because, “Hey, what can you do?” I tried to take what I heard in that piece and apply a similar idea to my thesis recital. I wanted to present a range of my own experiences with life. I worked a great deal with presentation and hoped to provide the audience with a sense of continuity and range of emotional display that went beyond the usual succession of pieces expected from a piano recital. I separated the pieces in my program with selections of prose from a variety of sources that heavily referenced my own life as well as friends — I hoped that the audience would identify with the experiences. And I’m proud of that night. A friend of mine said he felt that he learned more about me in that hour than in our four years of friendship. He though the show expanded logically on itself and resolved satisfyingly. Above all, he said, he enjoyed it — and that’s all I really wanted.

Stride is enjoyable, that’s why I took a closer look. It makes me tap my feet and want to sing. I love the idea that these pianists were creating something new that was very much their own — competing with each other yet smiling throughout. But the range of emotional display and complex techniques give

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82 Fell and Vinding, 145
stride its strength. The style — with its progressive harmonies and developing rhythms — had a lasting and significant impact on the mainstream of jazz that developed over the next decades.\textsuperscript{83} Smith and Johnson drew on ragtime, the blues, ‘ring-shouts’, and incredible technique to pioneer the style. Waller continued their legacy and pushed the style beyond just a way of playing the piano. Stride — with its prevailing strength and individual style — helped defined an era.

\textsuperscript{83} Machlin, vii


My Sometimes Lover

Nick Pappadopoulos

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My Sometime's Lover

17

Montréal, the Otter Creek, and matadors.
Submarine skylights, and warm summer nights.

21

Rodion and Sonya, and Roald Dahl.
Rainstorms, bites, and shouts.
Laughter and black stout.

25

The dockyards, the train tracks, and the Liberties.
Midnight roadsigns, and morning canines.

29

An architect dreams, of a wavy December.

33

Rainstorms, bites, and shouts.
Laughter and black stout.

Rodion and Sonya, and Roald Dahl.
Rainstorms, bites, and shouts.
Laughter and black stout.

The dockyards, the train tracks, and the Liberties.
Midnight roadsigns, and morning canines.

An architect dreams, of a wavy December.
My Sometime's Lover

† Lyrics are to be spoken aloud without rushing after the chord sounds
Camden Catch

Nick Pappadopoulos

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J's Meadow