

Tobias Marx, *a Brief Portrait of: Fats Waller*, October 5, 2012
Highschool of Music FRANZ LISZT Weimar
Department of Musicology Weimar | Jena
«Voices & Singing in Popular Music in the U.S.A. (1900–1960)»
Research project funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) PF 669/4-1.

Department of Musicology Weimar | Jena
«Voices & Singing in Popular Music in the U.S.A. (1900–1960)»*

a Brief Portrait of:
FATS WALLER

Tobias Marx

Abstract

Waller has been one of the best known and most successful jazz pianists of the 1930s. He sings on some hundred recordings using his voice in a very flexible way. As entertainer Waller is adding comments to the music. He uses roughness and rhythm in order to intensify his expression. And he is able to change quickly between different vocalizations to flexibly underpin song texts. By doing so Waller is able to generate further meanings to the lyrics.

1 BIOGRAPHY

Fats Waller was born 21st May 1904 in Harlem. His father supported Wallers interest in music by purchasing a piano and letting him accompany his street sermons as lay preacher. At the age of 15 he got a first job playing organ in a vaudeville show. After the death of his mother in 1920 he moved to friends and started to study stride piano reportedly by stopping the mechanism of piano rolls to follow and copy the chord progressions on the keyboard. Only a little later he became a student of James P. Johnson, the *king of stride piano* these days. He met Louis Armstrong, Andy Razaf and Duke Ellington and started composing music for revues. In 1928 Waller started recording for Victor. In the 1930s radio shows offered Waller opportunities to develop his singing voice.

He makes his first vocal recordings in 1931 with his studio band *Fats Waller and His Rhythm*. Waller travelled to Europe three times. In London he composed

*Research project funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) PF 669/4-1.

the ambitious *London Suite* for solo piano. He died presumably from pneumonia on board of a train heading to New York in 1943.

Today he is famous as composer of many Tin Pan Alley songs, among them *Ain't Misbehavin'* and *Honeysuckle Rose*. Waller got credited a lot for his stride piano playing and for introducing the organ into jazz music. Also remarkable is one of the first collaborations between Afro-American and Euro-American musicians in 1929 with Waller being the featured musician: *Fats Waller and His Buddies*.

In literature Waller is seldom mentioned as a singer. Mostly he is perceived as some sort of a comedian. An exception is a chapter named *Waller as Singer* by Paul S. Machlin¹.

2 ENTERTAINER

Waller often uses comments to apply a humorous approach to the music. The best known example for this is the Song *Your Feet's Too Big* that was published as a short movie, too. The song is obviously meant to be comic using lines like *There were four of us: Me, your big feet and you*. Nonetheless it shows features of Waller's vocal style which can be found in many of his songs: very quickly altered vocalizations sometimes along with spoken song lines and added spoken comments. The timing of spoken words is mostly rubato and sometimes march-like, for instance, when leading into a new passage. Spoken words are often vocalized on concrete constant pitches and even fit the harmonies. Waller uses speaking within songs to affirm and underpin song texts or change their contexts in an ironic way. The latter he is doing when creating a new connotation for the song *Your Feet's Too Big* by finalizing it with the comment *Your petal extremities really are obnoxious! One never knows, do one?*

3 FLEXIBLE VOICE

A prominent feature of Waller's voice is roughness. His clear and soft voice changes into a rough vocalization whenever he stresses syllables in combination with a pitch located in the upper part of his modal register. Figure 1 displays the difference between Waller's occasional rough vocalization and throughout rough singing. Waller tends to sing with a permanent rough voice towards the end of songs. Along with increased roughness he also tends to simplify melodies. Figure 2 shows how Waller reduces the melody of *Dinah* to a few pitches and how he abridges the original rhythm of the melody into shorter phrases in the second chorus. In addition, Waller often sings ahead of the beat and divides chains of eighth notes asymmetrically (swing feeling), as can be seen in figure 3. In combination with increased roughness and simplified melodies he often falls into more straight timing leaving out the swing feeling (see fig. 4). Regarding overall suspense Waller generates fairly intense per-

¹See Machlin (1985), p. 33-40.

formances in many last chorusses - although, different songs reach different levels of intensification.

Waller is able to change quickly between different vocalizations of his voice. One example are the first lines of the song *I'm Crazy 'Bout My Baby*². Waller sings the first line with his natural unaltered voice. In the second line on the words *for I left all my* his voice sounds pressed and thin. Waller applies twang: The larynx is probably exalted and canted. Then on the words *blue days* he changes to a full and deep sound, probably a lowered larynx position, and changes back to twang again for the word *behind*. This altering of the voice's sound underpins the song text by heightening the present situation over the negative past: *For I left all my blue days behind*.

By adding spoken words Waller is well able to direct the listener's attention to the text. Figure 3 displays a passage of *I Got Nobody* where Waller uses nasal vocalization. Singing and speaking cannot be differentiated clearly here since he uses a spoken-like rhythm and musical fitting pitches at the same time. Another example is scat singing that Waller uses sometimes for short passages. Figure 3 also displays a scat passage in measure 21 to 22.

Waller is able create tension in the music by singing staccato and therefore articulating the vowels very short. One example is the first verse of the song *Everybody Loves My Baby* (see figure 5). Waller dissolves the tension when he starts to sing legato in measure 14.

4 SUMMARY

This all boils down to a high flexibility in Wallers singing. He is able to change quickly between different vocalization settings. Combinations in Wallers singing consist mostly of different degrees of roughness and timing. A typical combination is a clear voice and legato singing, mostly at the beginnings of songs. This often changes to partly rough vocalization with swing feeling. In last chorusses his voice often combines roughness and on-beat timing. Spoken comments are often combined as neutral/rubato or rough/march-like. Some comments contain presumably altered larynx positions (see Figure 6).

References

Machlin, P. S. (1985), *Stride: The Music of Fats Waller*, Twayne Publishers. Boston.

²in the recording from 1st of August 1936; in the version of 1931 he sings differently.

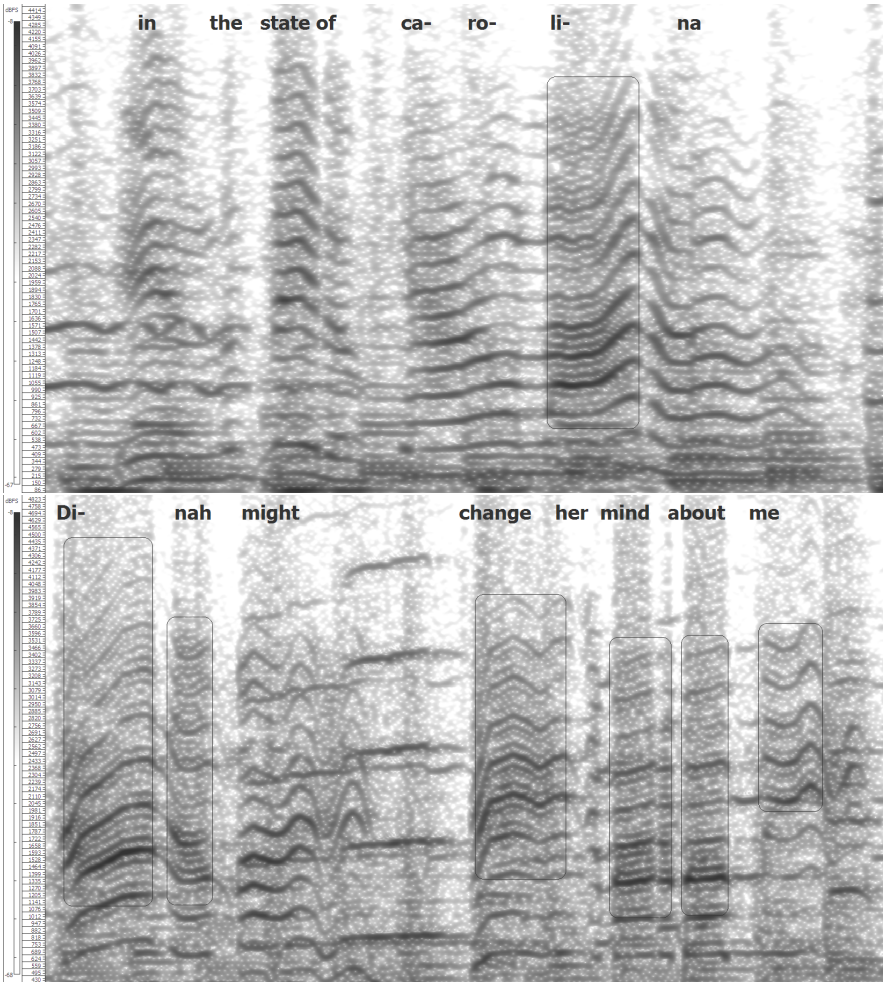


Figure 1: ► Fats Waller: Dinah - Marked areas contain additional subharmonics between the partials of the fundamental: audible roughness.
 top: part of first verse
 bottom: part of second verse, roughness occurs on almost every syllable.

Figure 2 shows two staves of music for 'Dinah'. The top staff is the beginning of the first chorus, and the bottom staff is the beginning of the third chorus. The lyrics are: 'Di-nah is there any-one fi-ner in the state of Ca-ro-li-na if there is and you know her show her to me'. The first chorus (top) has a more melodic and slower feel, while the second chorus (bottom) is more rhythmic and faster. Chord symbols include G, Em, Am, D7, G, Bm7, and Am7.

Figure 2: ► Fats Waller: Dinah - Beginning of the first chorus (top) and beginning of the third chorus after the solos (bottom). Compared to the first one, the second chorus displays less pitches and shorter phrases. In addition the audio file testifies for a higher level of rough vocalization.

Figure 3 shows the first verse of 'I Ain't Got Nobody'. The score is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked '♩ = 96'. The lyrics are: 'I, I ain't got no-bod-y no-bod-y cares for me I'm so sad and lo-ne-ly won't no-body take a chance with me I'm sing-ing love-songs ba-by all the time oh wak oh wak oh wak oh wak oh b-be a good old oh friend of mine but right now I got no-bod-y no-bod-y but no-bod-y cares for me bring it all out yes yes...'. The score includes vocalization and timing annotations: crossed note heads mark spoken words, square note heads mark nasal vocalization and lowered larynx, and measures 25 and 32 have distinctly different sounds than the singing voice. Off-beat-timing: words are sung up to an eighth ahead of strong beats.

Figure 3: ► Fats Waller: I Ain't Got Nobody, first verse - vocalization and timing. Crossed note heads mark spoken words, square note heads mark nasal vocalization and lowered larynx. In measures 25 and 32 spoken words have a distinctly different sound than the singing voice. Off-beat-timing: words are sung up to an eighth ahead of strong beats.

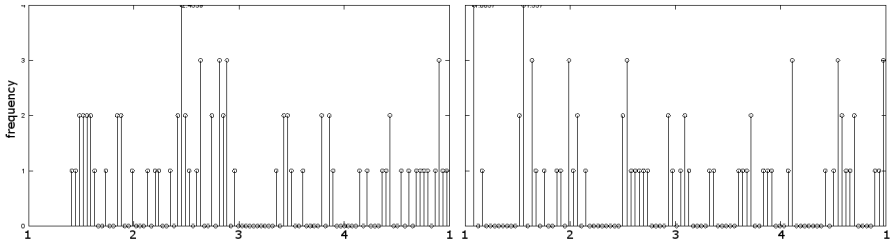


Figure 4: Fats Waller. Dinah, histogram of timing relative to the 4/4-beat, A-parts only (24 bars each, 75 tone onsets left, 72 onsets right). The timing in the first chorus (left) can be classified as offbeat, containing only few onsets on strong beats, which are antizipated. The second chorus (right) contains diffusion and some onsets on strong beats.

$\text{♩} = 120$

ev - ry - body n loves my baby n but my baby don't love no - body but
 me no - body but me ev - ry - body wants my ba-by
 but my ba-by don't want no - bo-dy but me that's plain to see

Figure 5: ► Fats Waller: Everybody Loves My Baby, first verse. The vowels appear very short. In the attached audio sample playback speed is reduced to illustrate the rests in the first line.

features	characteristics
roughness	clear - partly rough - constant rough
larynx	lowered - neutral - twang
articulation	legato - staccato
timing	off-beat - onbeat swing - straight
commenting duct	rubato - march-like

Figure 6: Fats Waller's singing flexibility: Different features of vocalization & singing and their respective characteristics.