

Long Time, No Song: Revisiting Fats Waller's Lost Broadway Musical

John H. McWhorter

Abstract: Just before he died in 1943, Fats Waller wrote the music for a Broadway book musical with a mostly white cast, the first black composer to do so – and the only one ever to do it with commercial success. Yet “Early to Bed” is largely ignored by historians of musical theater, while jazz scholars describe the circumstances surrounding its composition rather than the work itself. Encouraging this neglect is the fact that no actual score survives. This essay, based on research that assembled all surviving evidence of the score and the show, gives a summary account of “Early to Bed” and what survives from it. The aim is to fill a gap in Waller scholarship, calling attention to some of his highest quality work, and possibly stimulating further reconstruction work that might result in a recording of the score.

JOHN H. MCWHORTER is an Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, where he also teaches in the Core Program and the Center for American Studies. A linguist who specializes in language contact and change, he also writes about race in America and is a Contributing Editor for *The New Republic*. His recent publications include *Linguistic Simplicity and Complexity: Why Do Languages Undress?* (2011), *What Language Is – and What It Isn't and What It Could Be* (2011), and *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue: The Untold History of English* (2008).

In 1943 and 1944, if tickets to musicals such as *Oklahoma!*, *One Touch of Venus*, or *A Connecticut Yankee* were elusive, the theatergoer could drop in on another hit running at the time. *Early to Bed* was a musical about white people with a score by a black man – the first such musical on Broadway.¹ It was one of only three ever, and the only one that was a success. (The other two were Duke Ellington's short-lived *Beggar's Holiday* and *Pousse-Cafe*.) It played for a year, a healthy and profitable run for a show in 1943, before then touring the country. And the composer of this show was none other than Fats Waller.

Yet *Early to Bed* is a footnote in histories of musical theater. Even the dedicated musical theater aficionado has typically never heard of it. Playwright and theater historian Thomas Hischak, in his *Oxford Companion to the American Musical*, includes no entry for the show; and in the general entry on Waller that he does include, there is still no mention of *Early to Bed*.

There is temptation to attribute this omission to race-related bias, but in truth, *Early to Bed* does not appear in this or other histories of musical theater

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because, like most musicals of its time, it was intended as a passing entertainment. Historians of musical theater tend to focus on productions that pushed the form forward. In an era when Broadway musicals were produced almost as prolifically as television shows came to be in later periods, for every *Show Boat* there were two or three bread-and-butter shows that came and went unremembered.

Even the fanatic can draw a blank on the titles of similarly unambitious productions from *Early to Bed*'s era, such as *Beat the Band* (1942) or *Follow the Girls* (1944). And while the tradition of recording original cast albums began the year *Early to Bed* opened, at first only the very longest running, or at least the most prestigious, musicals were considered worth the investment. In 1943, for example, even a solid hit like *Something for the Boys*, with a Cole Porter score and starring Ethel Merman, was not recorded as an album.

We might expect jazz scholars at least to take interest in *Early to Bed*. However, except for Paul Machlin's invaluable description of some early Waller manuscripts for the score, these scholars have given the show little attention.² Waller draws interest as a musician because of his performance ability; *Early to Bed*, which depends on Waller's work as performed by others, doesn't fit this pattern. Moreover, jazz scholars' interest in musical theater focuses on shows from the 1920s, when the synergy between black jazz and the stage was most intimate—shows such as the 1929 black revue *Hot Chocolates*, which Waller wrote the score for and which featured Louis Armstrong on trumpet. *Early to Bed*, a white musical playing fifteen years later and just down the street from *Oklahoma!*, elicits less interest by comparison.

Finally, a theater or jazz fan who did find himself interested in *Early to Bed* would be hindered by the sad fact that

while almost every known Waller recording is extant and available on CD, no score of *Early to Bed* survives. Sheet music for six of the thirteen songs was published, but a few dozen bars of music is a pale reflection of how a song was performed on stage. Evidence of the rest of the score exists only in scattered fragments.

The neglect of *Early to Bed*, then, is understandable. Yet my long-standing curiosity as to what a mainstream Broadway musical by Fats Waller in 1943 was like, whetted further by a small-scale revival of the show in 2009 by the Musicals Tonight! company in New York City, has inspired me to bring together all of the surviving evidence of the score and the show.

The project is imperative for four reasons. First, the score was of great significance to Waller; and second, the score was a signature assignment for a black musician of the era: for these reasons alone, the obscurity of *Early to Bed* leaves a gap in our evaluation of Waller's legacy. Third, research reveals that *Early to Bed*, for all its broad colors, was as musically delightful as we would expect material written by Waller at the height of his creative powers to be. Fourth, however, *Early to Bed* was the beginning of what would almost certainly have been a new direction in Waller's creative output: namely, writing for the musical stage. Had Waller not died in 1943, his example might have inspired and paved the way for other black musicians to create musical theater works. Broadway might have seen a reiteration of the "Black Broadway" flowerings that had occurred in the very early 1900s and the 1920s.

Occasional forays into musical theater were as central to Waller's career as the recordings he is best known for today. More of this career took place in Harlem venues than on Broadway, with shows

such as *Tan Town Topics* and *Junior Blackbirds* (both in 1926) and *Load of Coal* (1929). *Keep Shufflin'* (1929), a “book show” (that is, with a narrative) sequel to Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle’s legendary *Shuffle Along* (1921), did appear on Broadway, but Waller split the composing chores with his stride-pianist mentor, James P. Johnson. *Hot Chocolates* (1929), a revue that introduced “Ain’t Misbehavin’” and “Black and Blue,” was the one show composed only by Waller that had played Broadway before *Early to Bed*.

Even by 1943, however, a black composer writing the score for a standard-issue white book show was unheard of. When Broadway performer and producer Richard Kollmar (1910–1971) began planning *Early to Bed*, his original idea was for Waller to perform in the show, not write the music for it. Kollmar thus did not set out to produce “a Fats Waller musical.” Rather, he had just had a flop with the now forgotten *Beat the Band* (mentioned above), and *Early to Bed* was meant to be a rollicking concoction that would make a profit.

For a lyricist, Kollmar tapped George Marion, Jr. (1899–1968), who had scripted successful films such as *Love Me Tonight* (1932), with its trailblazingly tight integration of music and narrative, and the Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers vehicle *The Gay Divorcée*. Kollmar had earlier recruited Marion to write both script and lyrics for *Beat the Band*, so he would therefore seem a natural choice for *Early to Bed*. Waller biographer Joel Vance bills Marion as “a literate and worldly lyricist,”³ but Marion’s lyrics are more aptly described as grandiloquently lusty: consider the *Beat the Band* song titles “Free, Cute and Size Fourteen” and “I’m Physical, You’re Cultured.”⁴

It is easy to see why recruiting Waller as the composer did not first occur to Kollmar, but it is less clear why his original

choice was Ferde Grofe, who was best known as the orchestrator of George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*, and whose signature compositions were portentous concert suites.⁵ After Grofe withdrew from the show in March 1943, Kollmar realized that Waller was a readily available replacement and gave him a \$1,000 advance for his composing chores.⁶

It was thus fortuitous that Waller ended up as Broadway’s first black composer for a white book show, and similarly fortuitous that, ultimately, he was solely the composer and not also a performer in the show. During a cash crisis, Waller called Kollmar in the wee hours after drinking heavily, threatening to leave the production unless allowed to sell Kollmar the rights to all of his *Early to Bed* music for a quick extra \$1,000. Waller came to his senses the next day, but Kollmar decided that his drinking habits made him too risky a proposition for performing eight times a week.

From that point, Waller was the show’s composer only. It bears mentioning, however, that solely from a modern perspective is *Early To Bed*’s most notable aspect Waller’s music. Waller was enough of a national figure by the 1940s to be caricatured in a Warner Bros. cartoon like *Tin Pan Alley Cats*, but ultimately he was considered what would have been called a “Negro entertainer.” Reviewers of *Early to Bed* gave no indication that they considered Waller’s participation particularly relevant. The show was processed and publicized not as Waller’s venture, but as Kollmar’s.

The music and lyrics of *Early to Bed* were largely written separately. Waller appears to have written most of the melodies first. In manuscripts of Waller’s work on *Early to Bed* (in the Victor Amerling collection, discussed below), some melodies have dummy titles (“Slightly Less Than Won-

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derful" is "Horse in Blue"; "Long Time, No Song" is "Twilight"), others are labeled generically ("Martinique" is first "New Latin Song"), and first versions of melodies do not match the final lyrics, showing that Waller was not working from prewritten words. (For example, the manuscripts show a full early version of "There's a Man in My Life" that does not scan rhythmically to the published one.) The creative process involved some in-person collaboration; Marion's daughter Georgette recalls Waller visiting the Marions' apartment often during the months before the premiere to work with her father.

Rehearsals for the show began on April 22, 1943.⁷ Kollmar gathered a reputed 109 backers for the show, including Milton Berle and the Stork Club's famous owner, Sherman Billingsley.⁸ The show premiered in Boston on May 24. Waller took the train to Boston with his second wife, Anita, and his son Maurice early that day; upon arrival, he contacted his saxophonist/singer friend Joey Nash, who had an extended gig in the city, and brought him to a bar with a piano to show off his tunes for the show. Nash recalled: "He was excited about every song, stopping to repeat, again and again, phrases and chords he particularly fancied . . . filling the room with etudes of ecstasy, sentimental songs and rocking riffs. *Early to Bed* was a triumph for Fats, every song was a gem."⁹

Waller was nevertheless so anxious about the reception of his music that he fortified himself with Old Granddad bourbon before settling in with the audience that evening for the second act.¹⁰ His worry was unnecessary. The Boston reviews, while harrumphing in grand old Boston style about the raunchier aspects of the show, were largely approving, and the run was extended by two weeks, until June 12.¹¹

Waller, however, was absent for the extended run, following an experience with the segregation still prevalent in 1943 even as far north as Boston. When Waller arrived at the hotel where his manager had reserved a room for him, the clerk insisted that no such reservation had been made and that no rooms were left. The Wallers met the same reception at all the other Boston hotels, and as a result, the composer of a new hit musical comedy ended up in a fetid flophouse. Waller quickly returned to New York, spending the rest of the Boston run busy with a gig in Philadelphia.

As was common in the era, Boston censors required that the "bluer" aspects of the show be toned down. The setting was changed from a whorehouse to a casino, the prostitutes became "hostesses," about two dozen lines were dropped, and the second verse of the title song, with its references to King Solomon settling in with a nightly concubine and Noel Coward slipping into "something flowered," was excised.¹² *Early to Bed* went on to premiere in New York on June 17. With ticket prices ranging from \$1.10 to \$4.40,¹³ the show ran until May 13, 1944, for a total of 380 performances.

In the wake of *Oklahoma!*, the plots of even lighter musical comedies were expected to evidence basic coherence and a relatively specific integration of music with narrative. However, *Early to Bed* was created just before that revolution in standards of evaluation, and therefore its plot is more generously viewed as an extended sketch rather than as a "story." It is clear from the two surviving copies of the script – a final one amidst George Marion's papers and an earlier draft held by the New York Public Library – that the aim was simply to amuse while leaving space for Waller's songs, which decorated the proceedings rather than moving them

forward. The overall feel is reminiscent of variety show skits on television in the 1950s through 1970s.

Early to Bed begins with an aging bullfighter's car breaking down in Martinique, where he, along with his son and his black valet, has traveled in hopes of a comeback at the Pan-American Goodwill Games being held there. The son is hit by a car and then taken to convalesce at the Angry Pigeon whorehouse, run by a former schoolteacher named Rowena. The woman driving, a nightclub dancer on her way to a gig, convalesces alongside the son and the two fall in love. Meanwhile, the bullfighter, El Magnifico, and Rowena turn out to have had a fling in the past and consider rekindling it, while black valet Pooch and Rowena's black maid Lily-Ann also feel a connection.

All of the newcomers except Eileen, a newly hired prostitute, assume that the Angry Pigeon is a finishing school, and Rowena opts not to disabuse them of this belief in order not to discourage the affections of El Magnifico. Soon, the California State University track team passes through town for the Goodwill Games, and out of public spirit, El Magnifico diverts them to stay at the "finishing school" as well. In a similar spirit, El Magnifico arranges for the prostitutes to build a float and display themselves on it during the Games, propelled by the track team. Their exertions in this effort and with the ladies cause them to lose the Games. However, the U.S. president congratulates the team for their touching magnanimity in letting other countries win, which leads the mayor in Martinique to acknowledge Rowena and her establishment for making the commendation possible. All couples are united.

Starring as El Magnifico was Kollmar himself in tawny makeup. Reviews suggest that his portrait of an aging Spaniard was convincing and his singing excellent,

not surprising given that he had introduced the standard "It Never Was You" in the Kurt Weill score for *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938) and Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart's "I Didn't Know What Time It Was" in *Too Many Girls* (1939). Rowena was the British actress Muriel Angelus, who contemporary audiences would have remembered for introducing "Falling in Love with Love" in Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart's *The Boys from Syracuse* (1938); she is most easily seen today in the Preston Sturges film classic *The Great McGinty* (1940) as McGinty's wife. Her staid quality would have served as an elegant counterpoint to Rowena's occupation. Pablo was Russian-born actor George Zoritch, cast for his dancing ability – he had headlined in the Ballet Russe – and good looks. Reviewers wanly praised his talent in a part requiring speaking and singing. Playing against him was Jane Deering as Lois. She was also primarily a dancer, and she complemented Zoritch in physical beauty, as attested to by production photos held at the New York Public Library as well as one in the possession of George Marion's daughter Georgette.

Eileen, the new prostitute, was played by Jane Kean. In an Associated Press review from June 19, 1943, J. M. Kendrick deemed her, with an enthusiasm typical of other reviews, "[o]ne of the most promising comedienne since Ethel Merman came to the fore." Only 20 years of age, Kean was later best known for playing Trixie in Jackie Gleason's *Honeymooners* franchise, taking over for Joyce Randolph after the famous thirty-five filmed half-hour episodes. In place of Waller, Bob Howard played the role of Pooch. Howard was a black singer-pianist entertainer who had been promoted by the Decca recording company as direct competition to Waller in the 1930s. His casting was perfect; film clips of his jazz performances

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reveal a virtual imitation of Waller's sound and mannerisms. Lily-Ann was portrayed by Jeni Le Gon – called “a fine, noisy mulatto girl” in a *New Yorker* review of June 6, 1943 – who had sung and danced with Waller's band. (“I did flips and knee drops and toe stands and all that sort of business,” she later recounted.)¹⁴ Harold “Stumpy” Cromer, who lived until shortly before the publication of this essay, as did Le Gon, played the dancing character Caddy. Maurice Ellis as a gendarme and David Bethea as a gardener were the other two black performers, cast generically as Martiniquans.

In line with the centrality of prostitution to the plot, *Early to Bed* was openly randy in tone. Deemed too bawdy for young son Maurice Waller to see,¹⁵ the show was subtitled “A Fable for Grown-ups” and judged to be “An Oversexed Musical” by the *Chicago Daily News* during the national tour. The script, designated a “one-joke farce” by writer Ethan Mordden,¹⁶ dwells endlessly in elliptical references to sex: in the second act, the girls' float costumes are announced according to the lubriciously allusive labels “Inter-American Naval Accord,” “The Liberated Areas,” “The Spirit of Global Uplift,” and “All Out for Hemisphere Defense.”

That sequence was a symptom of the fact that *Early to Bed* was as much a visual statement as an aural one; “On the whole it is for those who take their musical comedy by eye rather than ear,” Lewis Nichols wrote, albeit with little musical acumen, in the June 17 edition of *The New York Times*. George C. Jenkins' sets alone elicited applause from first-nighters; on the national tour in Chicago, “a good natured audience waited more or less patiently while the stage crew hung the delayed scenery, which reciprocated by being one of the show's major assets,” wrote Claudia Cassidy in a review from August 28, 1944. Broadway veteran Miles

White's costumes were, according to Burns Mantle at the *Daily News*, “brilliant and sparse,” while the dances were by Robert Alton, who had choreographed countless hits on Broadway, including *Anything Goes* (1934), and who later choreographed such hit films as *Good News* (1947). The female chorus included four top models of the day – Louise Jarvis, Choo-Choo Johnson, Peggy Cordray, and Angela Green – who were endlessly covered in publicity for the show. *Early to Bed* was indeed a sight to see.

As to what it was like to hear, six of *Early to Bed*'s thirteen songs were published as sheet music. “Slightly Less Than Wonderful” and “This is So Nice” were romantic duet fox trots, both performed by Waller on “V-disc” recordings made for the armed forces. The silky and flirtatious “Wonderful” was sung by the young lovers Pablo and Lois, presumably followed by an extended dance, as Zoritch and Deering were primarily dancers. There clearly were high hopes for the song, as it was quickly reprised by the black couple and the three black chorus members in a second saltier refrain, including the couplet “Within me elemental forces surge / Are you allergic to the orgy urge?” In his recording, Waller sings this refrain. (Despite Paul Machlin's surmise that it may have been written by Waller's frequent collaborator, Andy Razaf,¹⁷ the Marion papers reveal a typed version of this lyric, intended for Pooch and Lily-Ann.) “This Is So Nice (It Must Be Illegal)” was sung by El Magnifico and Rowena.

Also published were the two songs sung and danced by Howard and Le Gon, “Hi-De-Ho High in Harlem” and “When the Nylons Bloom Again.” The latter is one of two *Early to Bed* songs well known today, largely because of their inclusion in the megahit Waller revue *Ain't Misbehavin'* (1978). The other is “The Ladies

Who Sing with the Band,” which Waller also recorded, a comment on how physique can trump vocal chops for the aspiring female pop singer. As in *Ain't Misbehavin'*, this song served as a frame in *Early to Bed* for performance interludes satirizing pop singers of the era. The number was sung in front of a prop microphone by Rowena, Eileen, Lois, and Rowena's assistant, Jessica, with the proceedings culminating in a physical melee (depicted in one of the production photos). Reviews regularly cited “Ladies” as one of the highlights of the show, eliciting encores; but the brief sheet music gives no indication of the arrangement, who was imitated in the interludes, or the spoken lines, all of which made a bigger number out of the song. However, programs record that the parodied songs were “Jim,” “You Made Me Love You,” “Love is the Sweetest Thing,” “Wanting You,” “Love Me or Leave Me,” “All of Me,” “Love, Your Magic Spell is Everywhere,” “That Old Black Magic,” “I Want My Mama,” “Oh, Johnny, Oh,” and “What is This Thing Called Love.”

Finally, the ballad “There's a Man in My Life” was sung by Rowena early in the show. Waller recorded it as “There's a Girl in My Life,” and it is the only song from the show that has courted the status of cabaret standard, recorded by Pearl Bailey, Sylvia Syms, and Patti Page.

Waller recorded one other *Early to Bed* song, but only as an instrumental: “Martinique,” alternately known as “There's ‘Yes’ in the Air.” This is a highly infectious Latin melody (never mind that Martinique is a Francophone island!) with a very clever lyric (with two-and-a-half refrains) by Marion about the pliant mood the island puts one in: “They keep a mine-sweeper near / Just to sweep up discarded brassieres here / If you're inclined to undress / There is yes in the air in Martinique.” It would surely be better known

today if the show had been recorded or Waller had lived longer to publicize it. “Martinique” kicked off an elaborate first-act ballet finale, also regularly cited as a highlight of the show, presumably with dance music by Baldwin Bergerson, credited for “ballet music.”

One song exists in hand-written holograph but was not published: “Long Time, No Song” is a lush ballad that served as El Magnifico and Rowena's second-act love song. The title song “Early To Bed,” with a warmly pleasing melody and naughtily clever lyrics, was sung by Rowena's assistant Jessica and the coach to warn the track team away from carnal dalliance in the second act. It was recorded once, by jazz pianist Brooks Kerr in the early eighties, who in July 2013 told the author that he worked from a tape of Waller playing it, now lost.

Four *Early to Bed* songs were neither published nor recorded and do not exist even in unpublished holographs. Only their lyrics survive, partially, in the final script. For the 2009 revival, the Musicals Tonight! staff located the original production's Harold “Stumpy” Cromer, a veteran tap dancer who also played the Pooch part in the road tour, and asked him to recall these songs to the best of his ability. “A Girl Who Doesn't Ripple When She Bends” was a calisthenics sequence led by Rowena's assistant, segueing into a dance number with the character Cromer played (pictured in one of the surviving photos). “Me and My Old World Charm” was a character song by El Magnifico in which he recounts his romantic successes, often cited in reviews as one of the show's more memorable moments. Some reviews suggest that Rowena joined Magnifico in singing the song. A discovery of the actual “Supple Couple” would be especially welcome, as this is the one song in *Early to Bed* that was relatively integrated into the plot, layering three running com-

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ments on Pablo and Lois's convalescence and good looks by Jessica and Lily-Ann, Pooch, and El Magnifico (strangely concerned that all know that Pablo's underwear are of highest quality). "Get Away, Young Man" opens the second act as a comment by the ladies to the track team.

While the approximations created by the Musicals Tonight! team and Mr. Cromer are an absolutely precious feat of archaeology, sixty-five years inevitably filters recollection to the point that these versions of the songs lack the Waller stamp. The brevity of the recovered "Me and My Old World Charm" suggests particular attrition, as it is repeatedly described as a grand *tour de force* in reviews, one of which (from *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 4, 1944) even mentions a lyric – "In Madrid they went mad, in Cadiz it was just as bad" – that is now lost, likely along with much more material.

Working drafts of *Early to Bed* material are part of a collection of papers currently held by Victor Amerling, son of the lawyer who Waller's son Maurice employed; the collection includes manuscripts of four songs not used in the show. The up-tempo "That Does It" was also recorded by Waller, who played it on piano, on a private acetate recording. Also surviving are melodies titled "Take It From Here" and "I'm Getting Nowhere." I have also identified in these papers a melody originally intended for the Jessica character, a lovely ballad titled "I'm Dreaming," apparently from an earlier incarnation of the plot in which she had a love interest. Meanwhile, the Marion papers include a lyric without a known melody, "Men," apparently intended for a Mexican female character absent from the final script, while programs for the Boston tryout reveal a song that was eliminated before the New York run called "On Your Mark."

Waller was often said to spin off melodies effortlessly. However, the Amerling

papers reveal that Waller's creative process involved considerable experimentation. The manuscripts include alternate endings for the song "Slightly Less Than Wonderful" (as previously documented by Paul Machlin); later discarded bridge sections for the title song "Early to Bed" as well as "When the Nylons Bloom Again" and "Martinique"; and early versions of "There's a Man in My Life," "Long Time, No Song," "Hi-De-Ho High in Harlem," "Me and My Old World Charm," "Get Away, Young Man," and "A Girl Who Doesn't Ripple When She Bends" (titled "One-Two" in the manuscript, after the first words of its lyric).

Because original performance materials for *Early to Bed* are lost, we cannot hear how Waller's songs were arranged or orchestrated. However, we know that the head orchestrator was Don Walker, who helped create the "Broadway sound" in his work on countless musicals such as *Carousel* (1945), *The Pajama Game* (1954), and *Cabaret* (1966). Theater reviewers rarely attend to orchestration in any substantial way, but *Times* critic Lewis Nichols's comment that Walker "understands the trumpets of Waller and the drums of Martinique," and the frequent description of the show's musical ambience as "loud," leads us to assume that Waller's music was dressed up in Walker's typically sumptuous style, assisted by Ted Royal and Robert Noeltner, likely on less important songs, dance music, and transitions.¹⁸ Choral arrangements were by the dependable Clay Warnick.

After it closed on Broadway, *Early to Bed* toured with an almost completely new cast (none of especial prominence). The near-vaudevillian nature of the script is evidenced by the fact that the actor who took over the coach role, Mervyn Nelson, brought in a skit unconnected with the plot. He mugged Bert Lahr-style through

a depiction of a P.T.A. meeting – an addition that was regularly cited as a highlight of the show.¹⁹

Following the tour, the conductor's score and orchestra parts were lost to the winds. Before the institutionalization of musical theater as an art form, musical comedies were considered topical and evanescent. No one in 1943 had any idea that anyone even one year later, let alone seventy, might want to hear the songs from *Early to Bed* at all, much less in the arrangements as they were originally presented. For hits that had especially long runs or that benefited from a revival, original materials tended to survive. *Early to Bed's* purpose as a passing fancy, however, discouraged preservation of the show's materials for later retrieval.

In December 1943, six months into *Early to Bed's* Broadway run, Waller suffered a bout of flu and bronchitis while touring the West Coast and died of pneumonia on the train ride back East. Kollmar delivered a tribute to Waller at his funeral. The timing of Waller's death was especially unfortunate; although this fact is scarcely stressed in Waller biographies, writing for Broadway would likely have been the next act in his life.

Work for traveling bands, such as the one Waller made much of his living from, began drying up quickly just a few years after he died. Today we savor his film appearances, especially in *Stormy Weather* (1943), but as spellbinding as Waller was on film, cameos and subsidiary roles were all that a black comic and musician would have been able to achieve in mainstream cinema of the 1940s and 1950s. Once television came along, perhaps Waller would have landed his own show. He had hosted a successful radio show in the 1930s, and it was none other than *Early to Bed's* Bob Howard who, in 1948, became the first black host of a television show. Waller

could easily have been sought for that job, or a similar one, if he had lived. Still, it is likely that such a gig would have lasted only so long, given that black performers at the time elicited limited interest from the American viewing public and wan commitment from networks and sponsors.

Broadway offered Waller much more promise. The high quality of the melodies in *Early to Bed* alone demonstrates his potential as a Broadway hit-maker. Waller's gift for melody is equal to that of esteemed Broadway composers whose stars rose after World War II, such as Richard Adler and Jerry Ross, Jule Styne, or Harold Rome, and is superior to that of many composers less successful on Broadway, such as Morton Gould and Robert Emmett Dolan.

Waller, then, could have had further hit shows. Kollmar thought so; he had been negotiating with Waller to compose for either a white show with Libby Holman and Jack White (as reported in *Billboard* magazine in September 1943) or a black show.²⁰ As more musicals were recorded as cast albums, such recordings would have cemented Waller's new status as a musical theater composer. Even the evolution of musical theater in the 1940s and beyond would have complemented Waller's own development. As theater scores explored an increasingly broad range of emotions, Waller could have found an outlet for his yearning later in life to pursue more serious directions in his music. His acetate recording of the up-tempo, unused *Early to Bed* song "That Does It," for example, has an unexpectedly quiet, trailing coda, a mood and contrast that would have been effectively applied to the kinds of character songs Broadway composers were beginning to write at the time.²¹

In a broader sense, on Broadway in the 1940s to 1960s, black artists had all but no creative presence beyond performing, in

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contrast to the work of Will Marion Cook, Bob Cole and the Johnson brothers, Eubie Blake, Noble Sissle, and so many others before World War II. Musicals by Waller would have altered this situation, and in his wake, other black musicians might well have been inspired to experiment with the form. Just as likely, white producers would have actively sought out such talent in a quest to channel Waller's success. Duke Ellington might have been offered more projects and gotten luckier than he did with the experimental failures *Beggar's Holiday* and *Pousse-Café*. Rhythm and blues composers like Louis Jordan could also have transferred their abilities to stage music (instead of, in his case, having his music reach the stage only in the 1990s through the anthology revue *Five Guys Named Moe*).

In other words, *Early to Bed*, so forgotten today, could have marked the beginning of an important moment in the development of American theater music; it could have opened opportunities for black musicians in an era when slow but steady civil rights victories were making integration ever more a reality in American life. Instead, fate had it that *Early to Bed* was the end of a story, not the beginning.

That ending should at least be more available to those interested in Waller's legacy, as well as in good theater music more generally. Ideal would be a recording of the score's songs, newly scored for orchestra in period style and possibly bolstered in places by other lesser-known but effective Waller songs worthy of a new airing (such as for the pastiches in "The Ladies Who Sing with the Band"). Also, archivists, collectors, and hoarders across America should be on notice for manuscripts of the four missing songs from the score, and just possibly a copy of the score itself.

Waller should have the last word. On his recording of "Slightly Less Than Won-

derful" near the end of his life, Waller starts out with "Now, boys, I'm gonna give you a couple of tunes from my show *Early to Bed*, a *fine* show on Broadway that pays my cathouse dues, you know? I can't kid no more, but hold everything – here 'tis!" If only today we could say, "Here 'tis!" – a complete score for the study and enjoyment of Waller and his work.

ENDNOTES

John H.
McWhorter

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Basic information on major participants and events connected to the show's creation are derived from overlapping accounts in the Waller biographies *Fats Waller*, by Maurice Waller with Anthony Calabrese (New York: Schirmer, 1977); *Ain't Misbehavin'*, by Ed Kirkeby with Duncan P. Schiedt and Sinclair Traill (London: Davies, 1966); *Fats Waller: His Life and Times*, by Joel Vance (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1977); and *Fats Waller: The Cheerful Little Earful*, by Alyn Shipton (London: Continuum, 1988).

- 1 J. Rosamond Johnson composed the music for *Hello, Paris*, which ran briefly in 1911; but this was a revue (and an abbreviated one) rather than a book show.
- 2 Paul Machlin, *Thomas "Fats" Waller: Performances in Transcription* (Middleton, Wisc.: A-R Editions, 2001).
- 3 Joel Vance, *Fats Waller: His Life and Times* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1977), 49.
- 4 A useful source for lists of Broadway musicals' songs is the Internet Broadway Data Base, <http://www.ibdb.com>.
- 5 *Early to Bed* clippings file, New York Public Library.
- 6 Vance, *Fats Waller*, 147.
- 7 *Early to Bed* clippings file, New York Public Library.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Alyn Shipton, *Fats Waller: The Cheerful Little Earful* (London: Continuum, 1988), 65.
- 10 Maurice Waller, with Anthony Calabrese, *Fats Waller* (New York: Schirmer, 1977), 157.
- 11 *Early to Bed* clippings file, New York Public Library.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Shipton, *Fats Waller*, 106.
- 15 Waller, *Fats Waller*, 157.
- 16 Ethan Mordden, *Beautiful Mornin': The Broadway Musical in the 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- 17 Machlin, *Thomas "Fats" Waller*, xxvi.
- 18 Steven Suskin, *The Sound of Broadway Music: A Book of Orchestrators and Orchestrations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 378–379.
- 19 *Early to Bed* clippings file, New York Public Library.
- 20 Charles Fox, *Fats Waller* (London: Cassell, 1960), 73.
- 21 This recording can be listened to on YouTube.