

Fats Waller, *Handful of Keys*

Stride Piano Wizard - Intermediate level, grades 3-6

Objectives:

1. The student will identify stride piano style by listening to *Handful of Keys*.
2. The student will imitate movement of a stride piano player while listening to *Handful of Keys*.
3. The student will identify why the tune is titled *Handful of Keys* through imitation of piano technique.

Optional Objective:

1. The student will transfer stride piano left hand to Orff instruments or Boomwhackers.
2. The student will watch a video clip of Fats Waller playing piano.

Time: One 30-minute class period

Materials Required for Objectives:

Computer access to recording on the Internet and speakers for playback to class. Print out paper piano keyboards. Optional: Orff instruments or Boomwhackers and Fats Waller video performance, in *Piano Legends* (New York: Video Artists International, 1989.)

Procedure:

Activity 1 – “Fats Waller was a very talented piano player. Most jazz musicians needed a band to help them play the sounds we like to hear in jazz recordings, but Waller was such a fast piano player he could get almost all those sounds into what he was playing on the piano. Listen to *Handful of Keys* and see if you can hear how he manages to put bass sounds, melody and rhythm all at the same time in this song. Fats Waller was a stride piano player. Stride referred to the movement his left hand would make going up and back across the keyboard, like a very tall person walking really fast. A tall person would take big strides or steps. The stride piano player takes big steps or strides by playing a low note and then jumping up to the middle of the piano keyboard for a chord (more than one note at a time). Listen again, this time imagine his left hand striding back and forth across the piano keyboard to play a bass part and chords.

Activity 2 - To get an idea of how fast Waller played, let the students try to play along with the Waller recording with just the left hand jumping back and forth. Pass out paper keyboards and tell students to imitate the stride by playing a low note and then jumping the left hand to the center of the keyboard and playing a “handful of keys” or chords. Model the movement of the left hand for students with a paper keyboard taped on the blackboard or up where students can see you demonstrating the movement. Play the recording. Repeat if students would like to try it again. Focus them on listening to the “boom-chuck” sound or the stride part.

Activity 3 - Add the right hand. Ask students to now listen to the recording again and try to describe what the other hand plays. Students should be able to discern that the right hand has the melody. Play the recording again and ask them to imitate on their paper keyboards the right hand playing the melody. This will be just as challenging for them to imitate.

Activity 4 - If students are ready, play the recording again and imitate both hands. Feel free to pause the recording and re-focus the students if they get excited and seem like they are not paying attention to the music. They will naturally get excited, but recognize that they are enjoying the experience and not misbehaving. This activity helps to bring an understanding of the great technique needed to play stride piano.

Optional Activities:

Activity 5 - Try playing the stride part on xylophones. The recording is primarily in F but you will notice about two thirds of the way through it modulates up to G and then goes back to F at the end. Play low and high F's for first and last part of the recording. The middle section modulates to G and can be played by alternating G's. (Students could also play the first part of the tune and stop at the G section). Xylophones work best because the sound is best if it doesn't sustain. This could also be done with Boomwhackers.

Activity 6 - Watch Fats Waller play stride piano in the video/DVD *Piano Legends* (1989).

Extension: Listen to James P. Johnson's *Carolina Shout*,
<http://www.redhotjazz.com/jpjohnson.html>

Listen to more Fats Waller:
<http://www.redhotjazz.com/fats.html>
<http://www.fatswaller.org/>

Learn more about Fats Waller:
http://www.pbs.org/jazz/biography/artist_id_waller_fats.htm

Video Resource:
Piano Legends. DVD/video, 63 minutes. New York: Video Artists International, 1989.