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Stride! Fats, Jimmy, Lion, Lamb, and All the Other Ticklers by John L. Fell and Terkild Vinding, *Giant Strides: The Legacy of Dick Wellstood* by Edward Meyer (Book Reviews)

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Stride! Fats, Jimmy, Lion, Lamb, and All the Other Ticklers. By John L. Fell and Terkild Vinding. (Studies in Jazz, 31.) Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press; [Newark, N.J.]: Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers—The State University of New Jersey, 1999. [xvi, 237 p. ISBN 0-8108-3563-0. \$36.]

Giant Strides: The Legacy of Dick Wellstood. By Edward Meyer. (Studies in Jazz, 32.) Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press; [Newark, N.J.]: Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers—The State University of New Jersey, 1999. [xiii, 269 p. ISBN 0-8108-3564-9. \$45.]

As their titles suggest, these books focus on stride pianists rather than on the style itself. Well researched and written by experienced jazz enthusiasts, the books approach their subject from opposite points of view. *Stride!* provides a brief survey of the idiom followed by biographical sketches of players identified or associated with stride; *Giant Strides* recounts the life of a player who concluded the stride legacy.

The opening chapters of *Stride!* summarize the history of the style from its ragtime precursors (“Before Stride” and “Raggin’ the Scale”), through its origins in the music of the Harlem piano school led by James P. Johnson (“The Birthing” and “Shoutin’ in the Amen Corner”), to its definition (“Stride Right”). These chapters accept the classic account of stride’s lineage originally proposed by Gunther Schuller (*Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development*, vol. 1 of *The History of Jazz* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1968]): Harlem pianists

transformed ragtime into jazz “by the infusion of blues, by the introduction of a more swinging rhythmic conception, and . . . through the concept of improvisation” (Schuller, 214).

The brief biographies in the remainder of the book constitute its greatest strength. Although the lives and works of the best-known stride or stride-influenced players (Johnson, Fats Waller, Willie “The Lion” Smith, Earl Hines, Count Basie, and Art Tatum) are already well documented, the sketches focus on their stride activity. Especially valuable are the chapters on neglected, minor, or obscure players, several of which feature previously unpublished interviews. *Stride!* concludes with several appendixes: names and locations of clubs, theaters, and ballrooms connected with stride; individual lists of compositions by Luckey Roberts, Smith, and Waller; and a facsimile of Hines’s funeral and memorial service program.

Stride! presents a case for the promotion of Roberts into the stride pantheon of Johnson, Smith, and Waller. While persuasive, the authors weaken their position through a flawed attempt to equate Roberts’s signature piece, “Pork and Beans” (1913), with stride’s quintessential anthem, Johnson’s “Carolina Shout” (ca. 1914). The comparison is compromised, if not invalidated, by their use of a version of “Pork and Beans” recorded in the forties rather than the version first published—a defect unintentionally conceded later (p. 44).

The most noticeable problems of *Stride!* involve music examples or their omission. The first three music examples in the chapter “Stride Right” (pp. 45–46) are respectively inappropriate, incorrect, and indecipherable, while the lack of examples in the discussion of polyrhythm (pp. 51–53) renders its description, at least to a lay audience, incomprehensible. Likewise, the lack of examples in the comparison of “Pork and Beans” and “Carolina Shout” mentioned above makes the argument, however faulty, impossible to verify. Although Vinding’s handwritten transcriptions throughout the text are interesting and pertinent, they are difficult to read because of misaligned beats and idiosyncratic manuscript, while the Lambert transcription (pp. 139–41) contains some obvious notational errors. Finally, the presence of printed copies of “Castle House Rag” (pp.

20–23) and “Pork and Beans” (pp. 56–59) raises questions of intent. Since the authors refer to neither piece directly in the text, their inclusion must be regarded as gratuitous.

Dick Wellstood, the last of the numerous artists considered in *Stride!*, is the sole concern of *Giant Strides*. Born in 1927 as an only child into an old, respectable family in Greenwich, Connecticut, Wellstood’s life overlapped with those of the stride legends; he studied them on recordings and in person, Johnson being an early and lasting influence. Reared in traditional music, Wellstood resisted the bebop influences of his younger contemporaries and remained identified, despite his vehement dislike of categories, with the stride idiom throughout his career.

Notwithstanding the premature death of his father and the resulting penury of his mother (from whom he began piano lessons at age ten), Wellstood’s childhood was conventional, if somewhat lonely. His exceptional intelligence, noted early in life, became a burden at Wooster, the prep school he entered in 1940, where the school’s headmaster regarded him as a consummate underachiever. But his years at Wooster also witnessed the expansion of his interest in music and the birth of his desire to become a professional musician.

After graduation and a few months in the army in 1945, Wellstood joined Bob Wilber’s Wildcats from Scarsdale, New York. The Wildcats were a product of the Dixieland revival and a throwback to Muggsy Spanier and Sidney Bechet, with whom they jammed, gigged, and recorded, along with scores of other Dixieland icons. Married and with eight years of comparative security in bands led by Wilber and his successor, Jimmy Archey, Wellstood began to freelance in 1953. Thereafter until his death in 1987, Wellstood’s life was a series of club, recording, and tour dates, uninterrupted by two more marriages, four years of college and law school, and six months as a practicing lawyer.

Because of his versatility, Wellstood was rarely out of work. With jazz venues diminishing in a city consumed by the rock-and-roll craze in the late fifties and early sixties, he began seeking jobs outside the Big Apple. Eventually he moved to the Jersey Shore, from where he began his annual tours abroad and where he would remain

until returning to New York City in the late seventies. His final years were ones of economic stability and artistic success tempered by increasing health problems from decades of excessive drink and poor diet. The book concludes with a selected list of Wellstood's writings and an exhaustive inventory of his recordings.

With over 150 recordings as soloist or sideman to his credit and countless testimonials to his ability, why did Wellstood not become better known? The author suggests two reasons, both involving personality. First, Wellstood seemed trapped by his identification with stride and traditional jazz and was unable or unwilling to attempt recognition outside these genres. Second, he actively eschewed self-promotion and public relations to the extent of avoiding fans at festivals, cultivating a negative public persona, refusing to play requests, and other similar mannerisms. A formidable intellect and gifted writer with a facility for languages and a mastery of chess, Wellstood stumbled through personal relationships, apparently wary or afraid of intimacy. Nevertheless, his pride of craftsmanship, dedication to the art, and musical integrity helped transcend his social failures.

Giant Strides is a model of its kind. Based almost exclusively on the author's interviews, Wellstood's writings, and other primary sources, the book chronicles the pianist's life and works with a judicious balance of biographical detail and technical commentary. The author provides a comprehensive account of a scuffling artisan rather than a celebrated star—an account whose value can only increase over time as the unique world of the average working jazz musician changes, shifts, and disappears forever.

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