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Tuesday 18 – Thursday 20 August, 10.30pm

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Alexi Murdoch

Thursday 27 August, 9.30pm

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JASON MORAN | ALL RISE — A JOYFUL ELEGY FOR FATS WALLER

Thursday 13 August, 10.30pm | The Hub

The performance lasts approximately
2 hours with no interval

EIF.CO.UK/MORAN

JASON MORAN
TARUS MATEEN BASS
CHARLES HAYNES DRUMS
LISA HARRIS VOCALS
LERON THOMAS TRUMPET, VOCALS

US pianist, composer, bandleader and educator Jason Moran is one of the most influential figures in jazz today, and as artistic director for jazz at the Kennedy Center, Washington DC, and with teaching positions at Boston's New England Conservatory of Music and New York's Manhattan School of Music, he's also one of the art form's biggest public advocates. He's as happy working with cutting-edge visual artists as with San Francisco skateboarders, and his eclectic output brings together post-bop, avant-garde jazz, blues, classical music, stride piano and hip hop, combining an enormous kinetic energy, keyboard agility and an unabashed romantic sensitivity.

Moran has released nine diverse albums on Blue Note – his most recent is the Fats Waller tribute *All Rise* – and his 2010 album *Ten* (which won *Downbeat* magazine's holy trinity of jazz album of the year, pianist of the year and jazz artist of the year) brought together influences from Jimi Hendrix and music by Leonard Bernstein, Conlon Nancarrow and Thelonious Monk, as well as by the great jazz pianist Jaki Byard, with whom Moran studied at the Manhattan School of Music.

Visual art has long played a hugely influential role in Moran's output, and he's worked with renowned artists including Adrian Piper, Joan Jonas, Glenn Ligon, Stan Douglas and Adam Pendleton. His second album, *Facing Left* (2000), was named after a painting by Egon Schiele (and was also the first release by his regular performing trio – Moran on keyboards, Tarus Mateen on bass and Nasheet Waits on drums – that later came to be known as Bandwagon). His *Milestone* was commissioned by Minneapolis's Walker Art Center in 2005, and his *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things* was written the same year to be incorporated into an installation of the same name by Joan Jonas in New York. He wrote the ballet score *Refraction* for San Francisco's Alonzo King LINES Ballet in 2009, and scored Ava DuVernay's Martin Luther King film drama *Selma* in 2014.

But Moran is as much an ambassador for jazz's history as he is an advocate for the flexibility and creativity of its future. Hence his Fats Waller project, which began as a commission from New York arts venue Harlem Stage in 2011. Taking his cue from Harlem itself, the part of town where Waller was born and where he first shook up the music scene (and where the Houston-born Moran now lives), Moran was keen to showcase both Waller's tunes and his broader achievements – and in a way of which Waller himself might well have approved.

Fats Waller was a remarkable figure for his time, as much a larger-than-life showman as he was a musical innovator, dubbed the 'black Horowitz' because of his keyboard virtuosity, and called a 'bubbling bundle of joy' by his closest collaborator, lyricist Andy Razaf. He embodied the ebullient spirit of Harlem between the two World Wars, and he wrote hundreds of songs, including many hit tunes – 'Ain't Misbehavin'", 'Honeysuckle Rose' and 'Jitterbug Waltz' among them (all of which Moran reinterprets) – still cherished as standards today. He was a blockbuster entertainer, with a personality as big as his rotund form, performing in nightclubs, parties, in stage shows, and on the newly emerging radio shows and in Hollywood films. The story goes that he was even bundled into a car and kidnapped to perform at Al Capone's birthday party in 1926 (he ended up staying on a few days to enjoy the drink and the adulation). He was a mass of contradictions, too – the son of a preacher, he was a hard drinker whose alcoholism eventually contributed to his death at the age of just 39; and he expressed profound wisdom and sadness through uproarious comedy.

Following the advice of his wife, singer Alicia Hall Moran, Moran determined that his Waller tribute should be a dance party, an event that would reflect Waller's genius not just as a musician but also as an all-round entertainer. 'Unlike today, where jazz audiences generally remain seated, dancing was expected when Fats Waller showed up to a gig,' Moran has said. 'He played rent parties. He played joints, which we know from the song were always *jumpin*'.'

Moran immediately approached revered soul/jazz singer Meshell Ndegeocello to front his band for the project, expanding his Bandwagon trio with trumpet, trombone, sax and additional drums, and hiring professional dancers to help get the audience on its feet. He's toured the show across the US and Europe since 2011, and has been known to get right inside Waller's head by wearing an oversize Fats Waller mask, complete with top hat and dangling cigarette, made specially for him by Haitian artist Didier Civil.

For his live Fats Waller Dance Party, and the resultant album *All Rise: A Joyful Elegy to Fats Waller* released in 2014, Moran takes some of Waller's biggest crowd-pleasing tunes and radically reworks them to show just how timeless they are. He transforms an innocuous two-note phrase from 'Ain't Misbehavin'" into an insistent mantra repeating 'for you, for you' as if to summon confidence in the song's sentiments; 'The Joint is Jumpin'" has a Latin feel; 'Jitterbug Waltz' is slowed right down for a funky, gospel-style groove; and 'Ain't Nobody's Business' becomes a brooding R&B jam with sultry, conspiratorial vocals from Ndegeocello. The album's closing track, 'Sheik of Araby/I Found a New Baby', fuses together two songs by cracking apart their melodies and melding them together in new, minimalist combinations. But however radical Moran's beautifully crafted deconstructions and reassemblies of Waller's originals, he never loses sight of the songs' energy, spontaneity and sheer danceability.

© **David Kettle** is a freelance writer and editor