



Inspiring Artistry Repertoire Project

A Piano Magazine subscriber-exclusive digital resource

Olivia Ellis presents:

Portraits in Jazz: No. 3 “Sweet Mister Jelly Roll” and No. 7 “Billie’s Song” by Valerie Capers

Preparation and Presentation

Context: pieces that are helpful to have experienced or played before approaching this one

- Selections by Martha Mier from *Jazz, Rags & Blues* (many levels)
- “Chromatic Rag” by Margaret Goldston from *The Virtuoso Performer Book One*
- “Feelin’ Moody” by Wesley Schaum from *Jazz Styles Level Four*

Get Ready: creative activities to explore before the first encounter with the score, to prepare a student for deeper engagement and more immediate success

- Read about Valerie Capers and hear an interview regarding this collection on her website: <https://valcapmusic.com/>.
- Explore performances by Jelly Roll Morton, Billie Holiday, and other artists who inspired this set.
- Listen to the composer’s audio recording of these pieces.
- Discover performance tips and more information by reading “A Guide to Interpretation” by Valerie Capers, found in the appendix of *Portraits in Jazz*.

Initial Focus: features to pay attention to first; priority steps in reading and absorbing the music

- Focus on tricky fingering spots first, such as mm. 16, 20, and 23 in “Sweet Mister Jelly Roll.”
- Pay special attention when a melodic line is held while inner parts move (or vice versa), such as mm. 2, 4, and 6 in “Billie’s Song.”
- Watch for sections with many accidentals, like mm. 15-18 in “Billie’s Song” and mm. 29-32 in “Sweet Mister Jelly Roll.”
- For syncopated melodic lines, lean into accents or longer note values on offbeats.

Coordination Essentials: physical skills and drills for common technical challenges in the piece

- Left-hand stride bass accompaniment in “Sweet Mister Jelly Roll” requires facility and accuracy on its own before putting both hands together.
- Grace notes in “Sweet Mister Jelly Roll” need a quick wrist motion and release for a clean and animated sound.
- Full, thick chords in “Billie’s Song” should be supported by the arm to create warm, rich harmonies.

- Some chord resolutions in “Billie’s Song” necessitate sliding the thumb and second finger and using the pedal for connection.

Expressivity: ideas to connect and reconnect with the expressive and musical nature of the piece

- Pay attention to different touches and articulation in “Sweet Mister Jelly Roll” which can make the piece come to life.
- Create lyrics and sing along to the melodies in “Billie’s Song,” taking time to breathe between sections.
- Consider the phrase direction when several chords are repeated in a row, like mm. 1 and 25 in “Sweet Mister Jelly Roll.”
- Notice the contrast of dynamics from one line to the next.

Look Forward: approaches to set up for success with refinements that will need attention a few weeks down the road

- A successful performance will require balance of parts; listen for tops of dense chords and make sure supporting parts do not overpower the primary melody.
- Check for clarity in pedaling, being careful not to pedal too much in “Sweet Mister Jelly Roll” and listening for smooth legato pedaling in “Billie’s Song.”
- Work towards an energized yet steady pulse in “Sweet Mister Jelly Roll,” particularly in quarter-note passages where it is easy to rush ahead.