



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

Process and Practice

Fully present: tips for maintaining focus and engagement over time

- Identify elements of jazz in this collection, such as the use of extended chords in “Billie’s Song.”
- Compare these pieces to other ragtime and jazz selections, including works by Scott Joplin and Dave Brubeck.

Break it up: useful practice segments; how to connect them and plug them back into the whole

- Practice the left-hand stride bass from “Sweet Mister Jelly Roll” (such as mm. 9-14) on its own before adding the melody.
- Improve pedaling in “Billie’s Song” by practicing only the downbeats and aiming for smooth pedal changes.
- Roll large chords slowly to listen for harmonies and make sure notes are accurate before playing back up to tempo.

Layers and outlines: tips for focusing on how the parts makeup the whole

- Map out the overall form and notice what makes each section unique.
- Determine which parts are melodic and practice shaping them separately, leaving out inner voices at first.

Achieving flow: ideas for finding and maintaining tempo, managing modifications artistically

- Play left-hand accompaniments by themselves while singing the melody.
- When practicing in sections, follow through to the downbeat of the next section or the end of a transition to keep the flow.
- Listen for groups of phrases in “Billie’s Song” when choosing rubato, taking time at the end of larger sections rather than each small phrase.
- Tap a steady beat while humming the syncopated melody of “Sweet Mister Jelly Roll,” then tap a beat in the left hand while playing the melody.

Make it mine: tips for developing and refining a personal, internal sense of the piece

- Consider alternative timing and dynamics, particularly when sections are repeated.
- Identify unexpected harmonies or surprise rhythmic elements and highlight them in

performance.

- Explore pedaling in different ways to create color in “Billie’s Song.”

Deep knowing: tips for securing memory

- Ensure that you know the form of each piece, including any repeats, bridges, and coda sections.
- Outline the chord structure and notice any patterns in the harmonic progressions.
- Record a rehearsal from memory, going back and noting any trouble spots.

Final stages: tips for ensuring performance readiness, maintaining freshness and spontaneity, and reinforcing an expressive personal connection

- Explore other pieces from this set and consider each mood and style.
- Perform for a small audience and ask them if these pieces are reminiscent of other music they know.
- Play the left-hand harmonies while improvising a fresh melody in the right hand.