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Anything Phonographic – (In The Groove magazine)

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Fats is Good; Paul isn't – Remember that DVD I reviewed last year on pianist Art Tatum, on the strangely-named *Reggae Nashville* series from Screen Edge Video, distributed by Music Video Distributors? I gave it high marks for quality. Well, MVD has issued two more in the same series (neither of which is country **or** reggae) this month. Both, like the Tatum DVD, are TV documentaries produced and directed by Howard Johnson in the 1980s for the British Channel Four network. (The credit has been cut from the end of the film.) The first, ***Fats Waller: This Joint is Jumpin'***, consists of then-contemporary interviews with Waller's son Maurice (who looks a lot like his dad), and musicians who knew Waller, like pianist Sammy Price and Eddie Barefield (who played with McKinney's Cotton Pickers before leaving for Cab Calloway's band), along with performance footage of Waller from Soundies and films. The quality of the transfer is only fair, and there's a good deal of background noise, but this film is highly entertaining and well worth watching, if only for the juicy stories Maurice tells about his dad's many girlfriends and his relations with big time gangsters. The other release, ***Paul Robeson: Songs of Freedom***, focuses less on the music in the influential singer/actor/political activist's life than on communist politics and the civil rights matches of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Though Robeson's son is one of those interviewed, it's mostly historians talking and very little performance footage. Even worse, is that the video transfer was made from a VHS tape and there is an annoying "tracking line" at the bottom of the screen that can't be corrected. This volume is a big disappointment.