

james p. johnson



Photo: Institute of Jazz Studies

IMPORTANT FACTS TO KNOW ABOUT JAMES P. JOHNSON

Born:	February 1, 1894, New Brunswick, New Jersey
Died:	November 17, 1955, New York, New York
Period/Style of Jazz:	Stride
Instrument:	Piano, composer and bandleader
Major Compositions:	<i>Carolina Shout, Charleston, Running Wild</i>
Interesting Facts:	Johnson collaborated with poet Langston Hughes on a composition called "De Organizer," first performed in 1940. This piece combined spoken word with jazz music!



Included Listening: *Carolina Shout*

Track 2

■ The Story of James P. Johnson (1894–1955)

James P. Johnson is considered the “father of stride piano.” He served as a model for many young pianists of his era including Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, Count Basie and “Fatha” Earl Hines. He was an important link between ragtime and jazz piano.

When James Price Johnson was a young boy growing up in New Brunswick, New Jersey, he studied classical music and ragtime. Johnson had an advantage over most of his peers because he was classically trained and could play virtually anything on the piano. As a young professional he played in a sporting house, then moved on to bars and rent parties (private parties where guests contribute spare change to pay for entertainment and the extra cash collected is used to pay the host’s rent). After awhile, Johnson was the best jazz pianist on the East Coast and was hired to play on over 400 different recordings. He played in many jam sessions which sometimes included Willie “The Lion” Smith, Lucky Roberts and even his student, Fats Waller.



Piano rolls were recorded for use in player pianos.

Johnson recorded more than one hundred piano rolls. In 1921, Johnson recorded an original work which is considered to be the first recorded jazz solo; it was called “Carolina Shout.” This would become the composition by which all subsequent pianists would be judged.

The 1920s and 1930s were prolific years for Johnson. He accompanied many of the great female blues singers such as Ida Cox, Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters and also led his own band and recorded his compositions.

He also wrote musicals for the Broadway stage. His most famous work was “Charleston” from *Running Wild*. Johnson also composed symphonic works. In 1928, he wrote *Yamekraw: A Negro Rhapsody* (a Tone Poem for Piano and Orchestra). This composition demonstrated Johnson’s abilities to function in both the jazz and classical genres, although not many of Johnson’s extended works had lasting popularity.

Johnson’s true gift was at the piano. As the “father of stride piano” he had a huge influence on the great jazz pianists to come. In 1951, Johnson suffered from a stroke which ended his playing career. He died in 1955 at age 61.



Bessie Smith, blues singer

Photo: © Carl Van Vechten, Library of Congress.



Langston Hughes, poet, collaborated with James P. Johnson on a musical work called “De Organizer.”

Photo: © Carl Van Vechten, Library of Congress

Meet the Great Jazz Legends

Stride Piano: The Harlem Stride School

The term “stride” refers to a pianistic technique where the left hand strides back and forth, playing a bass note followed by a chord in the middle register. This creates an oom-pah, oom-pah effect. While this is going on, the right hand is playing the melody and/or improvising. Stride style evolved from an earlier piano style called ragtime. Unlike the strict, composed style of ragtime, stride allows the pianist to vary and embellish melodies, plus improvise new melodies over the stride bass, thus offering the pianist much more freedom to be creative.

Many of the great stride pianists included the “father of stride piano” James P. Johnson, Earl “Fatha” Hines, Willie “The Lion” Smith, and Thomas “Fats” Waller. All of these pianists were virtuosos and constantly amazed other musicians with their speed, precision, dexterity and imagination. They became collectively known as the Harlem Stride School and they would eventually influence future jazz stars including Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Art Tatum.



Photo: Institute of Jazz Studies

Art Tatum



Photo: Institute of Jazz Studies

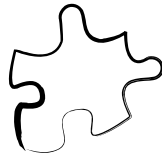
Earl “Fatha” Hines



Photo: Institute of Jazz Studies

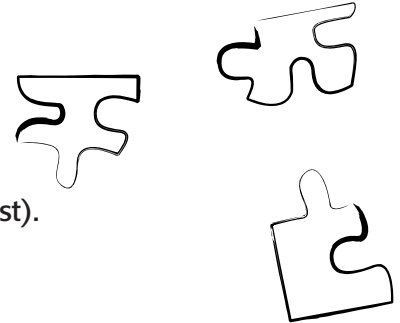
Thomas “Fats” Waller

johnson puzzler

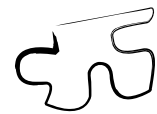


Draw a line through the incorrect answers.

1. James P. Johnson was born in (New York, New York; New Brunswick, New Jersey)
2. Johnson was known as the ("king of ragtime," "father of stride").
3. A virtuoso, Johnson recorded over (20 piano rolls, 100 piano rolls).
4. Johnson was also a (classically trained pianist, classically trained violinist).
5. One of Johnson's most famous compositions was ("Carolina Moon," "Charleston" from the musical *Running Wild*).
6. ("New Orleans Shout," "Carolina Shout") is a composition by Johnson and is considered to be the first recorded jazz solo.



An excerpt from Johnson's stride composition "Carolina Shout"



Fast jump

LH
mf
f

A G D/F# Em G7/D

C D7/F# G F#7