This Day in History… November 17, 1955

Death of James P. Johnson

On November 17, 1955, pianist and composer James P. Johnson died in Queens, New York. His music helped shape Harlem stride piano, and his song "Charleston" helped bring the dance to a much wider audience.



From the Jazz Musicians Issue

James Price Johnson was born in New Brunswick, New Jersey, on February 1, 1894. Music was part of his childhood. His mother sang in a Methodist church choir and played piano by ear. Johnson learned piano as a boy and listened closely to popular songs, ragtime, church music, and dance rhythms. His family moved to Jersey City in 1902 and later to Manhattan.

Johnson's first professional piano job came in the summer of 1912 at a resort in Far Rockaway, New York. He enjoyed it enough to leave school and pursue music full time. He played at clubs, theaters, and summer resorts. From about 1913 to 1916, he also studied European classical piano with teacher Bruto Giannini. Johnson learned ragtime pieces by pianists such as Luckey Roberts, Eubie Blake, and Richard "Abba Labba" McLean. He began writing his own rags and performing in touring revues, including the Smart Set.

In January 1921, Johnson became a staff pianist for the QRS piano-roll company. He was its first Black staff pianist. Piano rolls captured performances so people could hear them on player pianos. Johnson also began making phonograph records. "Carolina Shout," one of his best-known compositions, became a challenging test piece for aspiring jazz pianists. Duke Ellington later recalled learning it from one of Johnson's piano rolls.

Johnson was also a sought-after accompanist. He could transpose a song into different keys to suit singers, including Ethel Waters and Bessie Smith. Waters later wrote that singing with Johnson "made you want to sing until your tonsils fell out." His playing gave singers rhythmic support while leaving room for their phrasing and improvisation.



Stamp honors the Charleston dance, which was popularized thanks to Johnson's song, "The Charleston."

In 1923, Johnson went to England as musical director for the revue *Plantation Days*. That year, he also composed music for the Broadway show *Runnin' Wild*, with lyrics by Cecil Mack. The production ran for 228 performances. It featured Johnson's song "Charleston," which helped popularize the dance across the country. The dance itself grew from Black social traditions that existed before the show.

Johnson continued writing for stage productions, but he also pursued larger musical forms. In 1928, his rhapsody *Yamekraw* was performed at Carnegie Hall. William Grant Still arranged the orchestration, and Fats Waller played the piano part. Johnson later composed *Harlem Symphony*, completed in 1932. The Depression and changing musical tastes limited opportunities for many performers and composers, including Johnson.

Interest in early jazz and ragtime revived in the late 1930s. Johnson performed at John Hammond's "From Spirituals to Swing" concerts at Carnegie Hall in 1938 and 1939, and he recorded again. He suffered a stroke in 1940, but returned to performing, composing, and recording in 1942. A more severe stroke in 1951 ended his performing career. He died four years later, at age 61.

Johnson's stride style grew from ragtime but gave jazz piano a flexible, improvisational sound. His left hand often alternated bass notes and chords, while his right hand played syncopated melodies and variations. He used wide, full chords that gave a solo piano a powerful sound. His approach influenced Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and later generations of jazz pianists. Johnson entered the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1970, and his 1921 recording of "Carolina Shout" was added to the Grammy Hall of Fame in 2020. His compositions also reached later movie audiences: "Charleston" appeared in *It's a Wonderful Life* and *The Great Gatsby*.

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