

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FJ 2850

# THE ORIGINAL JAMES P. JOHNSON

Programmed by David A. Jasen

Mastered by Nick Perls

Notes by Charles Edward Smith and David A. Jasen

Original recordings by Moses Asch

NEVER PREVIOUSLY RELEASED

Liza

Aunt Hagar's Blues

Sweet Lorraine—take 1

Memphis Blues

The Dream

St. Louis Blues

Euphonic Sounds

Sweet Lorraine—take 2

Daintiness Rag

Blues for Jimmy

Jersey Sweet—take 1

Jersey Sweet—take 2

Keep Movin'

Jungle Drums

Snowy Morning Blues

Twilight Rag





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Daintiness Rag 1  
Blues for Jimmy  
Jersey Sweet—take 1  
Jersey Sweet—take 2  
Keep Movin'  
Jungle Drums  
Snowy Morning Blues  
Twilight Rag

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Liza 2  
Aunt Hagar's Blues  
Sweet Lorraine—take 1  
The Dream  
Memphis Blues  
Euphonic Sounds  
St. Louis Blues  
Sweet Lorraine—take 2

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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

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# THE ORIGINAL JAMES P. JOHNSON

JAMES P. JOHNSON

by

Charles Edward Smith

(edited by David A. Jasen)

Jimmy was born on February 1, 1891 in New Brunswick, New Jersey, but began to work in New York City when very young. He had started to create music based on the folk music brought north with them by the people who danced at The Jungles Casino. Thus, when Jimmy became the favorite of all pianists at rent parties, when he played for the wealthy on Park Avenue or the poor on Lenox, at concerts of the Clef Club or joints run by gangsters, the gift of music he brought was also the gift of heritage.

Having begun his career early, Jimmy could recall a time when there were very few instrumental groups, when he worked almost always by himself, or merely with drums.

Insufficient stress is placed upon James P. Johnson as the musical spokesman

for the people who moved north to the Negro neighborhood off Columbus Circle that used to be known as San Juan Hill. These people were from the area around Charleston, South Carolina, and as Jimmy recalled to Tom Davin (The Jazz Review, 1959), "Most of them worked for the Ward Line as longshoremen or on ships that called at southern coast ports. There were even some Gullahs among them." (Gullahs refers to Negroes of the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina, as well as to their dialect, which included many African words).

They liked to "show off their best steps" and chose "cotillions and cakewalks that would give them a chance to get off." How they "got off", in the cellar cabaret with its dripping candles, is recalled vividly and -- in which makes it doubly worth quoting -- with understanding: "The dances they did at The Jungles Casino were wild and comical -- the more pose and the more breaks, the better. These Charleston people and the other southerners had just come to New York.

They were country people and they felt homesick. When they got tired of two-steps and schottisches (which they danced with a lot of spieling) " -- an appreciation of satirical attitudes -- "they'd yell: 'Let's go back home!' ... 'Let's do a set.' 'Now, put us in the alley!'"



And Jimmy would do just that, using a cotillion tune he's created that included the special beat for the dance rhythm he would later use in The Charleston. At other times, "I'd do my Mule Walk or Gut Stomp for those country dances." This seems almost an anomaly, since the cultural picture usually drawn of northern urban Negro life was almost anti-down home. However, the living quality of Gullah music came into Harlem and, hence, into jazz via San Juan Hill and James P. Johnson.

What has been described as his early retirement did not represent a withdrawal from music but a greater concentration on studies and writing. From it resulted his Concerto for Piano and Orchestra and other compositions. He confided to friends his unhappy conviction that his color had continually impeded his progress but he was well aware of the fact that more than this was involved, that the time wasn't ripe for a composer to come up from the jazz ranks, as it were. But later he played his Concerto with the Brooklyn Symphony Orchestra, augmented for the occasion by jazz musicians. After the concert he came out to greet friends, beaming in white tie and tails. The notice in the press would be small but the occasion was large.

Jimmy was naturally inventive and what seemed casual playing, as in the club where he last played in Greenwich Village, was in fact vigorously improvisational. Jazz tourists took it for what it seemed but connoisseurs and musicians came there night after night -- listening for the unexpected.

Once in a while Jimmy would glance at friends to see if they'd noticed the little changes in a piece that gave it a new dimension. And when he was taking a breather (and refreshment) they came to love that growly voice behind the cigar,

trading anecdotes or holding forth on the many sides of music. "In the Alley" or at the concert hall, music was music and Jimmy didn't play favorites. He had the most catholic appreciation of music of anyone his age in jazz at the time.

He remarked once that the audience for whom a piece was being improvised helped to determine the manner in which it was played, and he thought somewhat in terms of composition when playing for a listening audience. But one can usually spot where a tune fits in his career as well, a ragtime or blues theme from the lore of itinerant piano players, a Charleston beat from a Jungles Casino piece, or that famous 20's Charleston sound, written for a show of the period.

## THE ORIGINAL JAMES P. JOHNSON

by  
DAVID A. JASEN

Whether he played his original compositions, as on side one, or whether he interpreted other composer's works, as on side two, James Price Johnson was an original. We are extremely fortunate that these heretofore unknown sides have come to light. Recorded within a two year span - 1943-1945 - these sixteen selections present one of the greatest jazzmen in a relaxed mood of musical maturity.

### SIDE ONE

Daintiness Rag, which opens this set of original compositions, was composed in 1916. He made a piano roll of



it around 1921 and nothing further was heard of it until he made this acetate recording in 1943. He made one other recording of it in 1947.

Aunt Hagar's Blues, Memphis Blues, and St. Louis Blues are magnificent tributes to W.C. Handy and reveal further sensitivity.

Blues for Jimmy, Jersey Sweet, and Keep Movin' show diverse moods and provide a wealth of musical variety which reflect his life experiences. Note especially how Blues for Jimmy is melodic in a show-tune way. To illustrate Charles Edward Smith's contention on that James P's playing was mostly improvisational, we provide the two takes of Jersey Sweet.

Sweet Lorraine is Cliff Burwell's best-known tune and a favorite of jazz pianists everywhere. These two completely different performances again pointedly show the essence of jazz and James P's extraordinary creativity.

Jungle Drums is an example of his preoccupation with utilizing his African heritage in a classical frame, which took most of his composing time in the thirties.

Snowy Morning Blues had been his own most popularly recorded piece of the 20's (he never recorded The Charleston), and he made several discs of it during the 40's. In this 1943 version, he achieves quite another mood.

The Dream was a composition by the legendary Jess Pickett, a Harlem pianist of the 1890's from whom James P. learned the tune. It includes what Jelly Roll called the "Spanish Tinge." It is interesting to compare this performance with the one Eubie Blake recorded, for Eubie also learned it from Pickett - at a different time and place.

Twilight Rag, another little-known composition, finishes the side gloriously. As with all of these selections, this version has never appeared before on disc.

Euphonic Sounds, written by Scott Joplin, was considered his most difficult rag and was used as a test piece for the "professors" in Harlem. Strangely, this performance in 1944 was the first time this composition had ever been recorded - by anyone!

## SIDE TWO

Liza illustrates another facet of Stride playing, as James P. delicately but firmly propels the George Gershwin composition with unaccustomed speed maintaining the swinging feeling throughout.



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