

the original james p. johnson

1942-1945: piano solos



- 1 **Liza** 2:49
- *2 **Aunt Hagar's Blues** 2:30
- *3 **Sweet Lorraine** 2:47
- 4 **Jersey Sweet** 2:28
- 5 **Yamekraw—A Negro Rhapsody** 11:56
- 6 **Daintiness Rag** 2:03
- *7 **The Dream** 3:41
- *8 **The Dream (alternate)** 2:23
- 9 **Blue Moods** 4:01
- *10 **Keep Movin'** 2:28
- *11 **Woman Blues** 3:47
- *12 **Jazzamine Concerto** 6:26
- 13 **St. Louis Blues** 3:59
- 14 **Jungle Drums** 2:33
- 15 **Blue Moods, Sex** 4:38
- 16 **Euphonic Sounds** 2:40
- 17 **Twilight Rag** 2:32
- 18 **Snowy Morning Blues** 3:14
- *19 **Snowy Morning Blues (alternate)** 2:57
- 20 **Blues for Jimmy** 2:52

Previously unreleased titles
Total time 73:44

SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS PRESENTS twenty rare piano solos, many never before released, by James P. Johnson, "the father of Harlem stride piano." Jazz comes to life as Johnson lived it—in vibrant performances of Joplin and Handy, a Gershwin hit, and especially his own compositions—1917 classic rags, a 1923 show tune, newly discovered blues improvisations, and three of his pioneering "third stream" symphonic works.



"...it was me, or maybe Fats, who sat down to warm up the piano. After that, James took over. Then you got real invention—magic, sheer magic."


—Duke Ellington

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Smithsonian
Folkways



- 1 **Liza** (George & Ira Gershwin, Gus Kahn, WB Music Corp/ASCAP & Gilbert Keyes Music Corp/ASCAP)
- *2 **Aunt Hagar's Blues** (W.C. Handy, Handy Brothers Music Inc./ASCAP & EMI Robbins Catalogue Inc./ASCAP)
- *3 **Sweet Lorraine** (Clifford Bruwell & Mitchell Perish, EMI Mills Music, Inc./ASCAP)
- 4 **Jersey Sweet**
- 5 **Yamekraw—A Negro Rhapsody**
- 6 **Daintiness Rag**
- *7 **The Dream** (Jesse Pickett)
- *8 **The Dream (alternate)** (Jesse Pickett)
- 9 **Blue Moods**
- *10 **Keep Movin'**
- *11 **Woman Blues**
- *12 **Jazzamine Concerto**
- 13 **St. Louis Blues** (W.C. Handy)
- 14 **Jungle Drums**
- 15 **Blue Moods, Sex**
- 16 **Euphonic Sounds** (Scott Joplin, EMI Mills Music, Inc./ASCAP)
- 17 **Twilight Rag**
- 18 **Snowy Morning Blues**
- *19 **Snowy Morning Blues (alternate)**
- 20 **Blues for Jimmy**

(All compositions by James P. Johnson unless otherwise noted)

Original sessions recorded by Moses Asch
 Reissue compiled and produced by Kevin Doran
 Newly annotated by David Cayer

Photo (and front cover photo) courtesy Smithsonian Folkways archives

Introduction by David Cayer

THIS COMPACT DISC DOCUMENTS the rebirth in the 1940s of James P. Johnson's jazz career. From 1917 through the 1920s in New York, he had a brilliant career as pianistic innovator, as composer of piano showpieces, songs, and show music, and as accompanist of great singers. But Johnson virtually disappeared from the jazz scene in the 1930s, devoting himself to composing extended concert music. Moses Asch, founder of Asch, Disc, and Folkways Records, helped launch what Johnson's biographer, Scott E. Brown, calls "A Johnson Renaissance" during the early 1940s with recordings now part of the Smithsonian Folkways archives. Yet many of Johnson's best efforts for Asch long remained unissued, including eight of the twenty tracks on this disc.

Except for a band of Johnson enthusiasts—musicians, jazz historians, archivists, and dedicated producers of historic recordings like Moses Asch—Johnson was so neglected after his death in 1955 that jazz historian Grover Sales, writing in the early 1980s, described him as "the leading contender for the title of our most overlooked musical genius." Fortunately, history is sometimes

ABOUT THE TRACKS by David Cayer

1 **LIZA** is among the most brilliant of James P. Johnson's recordings of the 1940s. His two takes for Asch (Robert Hilbert's discography dates them as "possibly May 1945") were his only studio performances, but George Gershwin's 1929 hit tune from the musical *Show Girl* clearly was a party piece for Johnson. In 1937, he played it in Fats Waller's home for a party which included Eubie Blake and Willie "The Lion" Smith (the home recording of this is damaged

and noisy but similarly brilliant); in 1947, he played it for a college audience. In this performance, he states the theme slowly with chords for eight bars, and then accelerates into five scintillating AABA choruses, a demonstration of orchestral pianism as striking for the inventiveness of its variations as for its velocity. Anyone who believes that the stride masters were limited to nothing but oom-pah bass lines should listen to Johnson's left-hand accenting of offbeats, his mercurial right hand, and his overall blend of swiftness and ease.

self-corrective, and this release of rare and formerly unissued performances contributes to his recent public recognition. The United States Postal Service selected James P. Johnson as one of ten jazz artists featured in the Jazz Musicians series of stamps, issued in September 1995, commemorating "Legends of American Music." This series, the first devoted to jazz greats, includes Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins, Charlie Parker, Jelly Roll Morton, Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Charles Mingus, Erroll Garner, and Johnson's old friend and colleague, Eubie Blake. Smithsonian Folkways' release of the piano solos will surely contribute to the long overdue recognition of Johnson's musical genius.

Although his 1940s renaissance included other excellent recordings, concerts, and radio appearances, Johnson's relation with Asch was unique because of the freedom and range he enjoyed. He could have echoed Mary Lou Williams, who recorded for Asch in the same period: "Moe had more love and more respect for jazz artists....He'd turn on the tape and go away....He'd just tell you to go ahead and record what you wanted to record" (quoted in Dan Morgenstern's notes to Smithsonian Folkways CD SF 40810, Mary Lou Williams, *Zodiac Suite*). Johnson's keen sense of histo-

2 **AUNT HAGAR'S BLUES** was published by W.C. Handy in 1922 as "Aunt Hagar's Children Blues." The latter is the title of a 1921 vocal recording on which Johnson leads "Jimmy Johnson's Jazz Boys" but is inaudible as pianist. This alternate take for Asch is a gorgeous pianistic salute to one of Johnson's early influences and a rebuke to those purists who deny his stature as a blues pianist because he often contemplates the blues, rather than shouts them. In six choruses of traditional blues structure, he gently introduces a touch of minor key, a bit of stride,

and a bit of boogie bass. His adept use of grace notes, tremolos, rapid arpeggios, runs, and repeated thirds enhance Handy's theme.

3 James P. Johnson recorded **SWEET LORRAINE** only for Asch, possibly in May of 1945, in two takes. This is the unissued alternate; both were intended for the eventual release, but the alternate was inadvertently replaced by a Cliff Jackson version made sometime later. Though Johnson did not often record popular or show music standards, his "Lorraine," like "Liza" (or

ry, along with this freedom, produced performances whose musical sources date from before 1900—"The Dream" (tracks 7, 8)—to slightly later ragtime and blues by Scott Joplin (track 16) and W.C. Handy (tracks 2, 13). Johnson could also record several of his own prized compositions for Asch, including two he had often played live but had not recorded since his 1917 piano rolls. He could perform two standards from the American songbook—"Sweet Lorraine" and his blazing version of "Liza" (tracks 3, 1).

And, most precious of all, the Asch connection gave James P. an opportunity to leave behind for eventual release solo piano versions of three of his neglected symphonic jazz works, never before recorded: *Yamekraw—A Negro Rhapsody*, the adagio from the *Jazzamine Concerto*, and a shortened version of his "symphonic poem," *Jungle Drums* (tracks 5, 12, 14). In short, Johnson documented his vision of his own jazz history for Asch because he knew that such an opportunity would not come elsewhere.

There were also, unfortunately, some disadvantages. Wartime shortages limited supplies of shellac, and Asch's recordings of the period often had noisy surfaces (reissues by Smithsonian ▶

Cole Porter's "What Is This Thing Called Love?"), shows how comfortable he was with the form. In this 1928 tune by Cliff Burwell, he plays a 4-bar introduction, two sweet AABA choruses with steady chord progressions in the bass, and gradual, rather gentle, right-hand variations in the second chorus, followed by a brief coda.

4 **JERSEY SWEET** would have been a pleasant salute to Johnson's home state, but it is a fictitious (or substitute) title for his "Just Before Daybreak," apparently used only

on the Folkways LP. It was copyrighted as "Just Before Daybreak" in August 1946, two years after Johnson had performed it as a solo feature at one of Eddie Condon's Town Hall concerts. He did two very similar takes for Asch, both issued on the LP. This first take follows a 4-bar introduction with six 16-bar choruses on the same lilting theme. With these variations ranging widely across the keyboard, the rhythm weaves smoothly from right hand to left and back, while the theme is stated in chords in the third, fourth, and sixth chorus.

Folkways have upgraded the sound of Asch's 78s, LPs, and acetates).

But the primary problem for some reissues from the Folkways archive, as these notes sometimes indicate, is missing or imprecise documentation. Asch's operation stressed freedom, not organization. Samuel Charters, a very friendly annotator of one Asch anthology, commented on the "almost hopeless confusion" in the offices:

Boxes carefully labeled "Jazz, American" turn out to contain copies of a Ukrainian folk dance record. Old acetate recordings on a shelf marked "Spoken Arts" turn out to be missing masters for a Coleman Hawkins recording session.

My occasional visits to Asch's midtown Manhattan office in the 1970s confirm this. I found shellac peeling off the glass bases of discs and many reels of tape with a single name on the cover but no listing of contents.

The results create discographical confusion, especially regarding recording dates. Johnson's two expert discographers (see bibliography) can only make educated guesses about most of these sessions;

5 **YAMEKRAW**, subtitled *A Negro Rhapsody*, is Johnson's earliest and most popular extended symphonic work. He composed and published it in 1927 as a piano solo; in 1928, the noted Black composer, William Grant Still, orchestrated it into piano concerto form and conducted it at Carnegie Hall with Fats Waller as soloist. In orchestral form, it received numerous performances, including one with Johnson as pianist in a 1945 Carnegie Hall concert, which featured several of his symphonic works.

Johnson originally intended to base

Yamekraw on an original theme, but several veteran Black composers, including Will Marion Cook and Will Vodery, urged him to utilize traditional music, emulating Dvorak's *New World Symphony*, because his goal was (in the words of Perry Bradford, his publisher) to produce "a genuine Negro treatise on spiritual, syncopated, and 'blue' melodies... expressing the religious fervor and happy moods of the natives of Yamekraw, a Negro settlement situated on the outskirts of Savannah, Georgia." The result was a single movement in four sections, which he recorded

in some cases, even the year is uncertain ("possibly 1944" for Yamekraw is one example), and such uncertainty leaves open the possibility that there were more sessions than are listed. Some Asch recordings have matrix or studio code numbers, but most do not, so the sequence of performances is often unknown. Dating problems affect the accuracy of personnel lists. One LP contains two versions of "**Sweet Lorraine**," with notes citing Johnson's variety of treatment. Indeed, Johnson was a master of variations, but in this case the variety occurred because one of these takes was recorded by Cliff Jackson some months later. Apparently, it was mistakenly substituted for Johnson's fine alternate take, issued here for the first time (track 3).

The delay between recording and release dates can make the duration of individual tracks significant. In the early 1940s, Asch and Johnson anticipated release on 78 RPM discs, probably 10-inch ones with their three-minute limitation. Acetates in the archive include some longer performances, and there is every reason to believe that Asch forgot or misplaced takes too lengthy for 78s, even though LPs later expanded the possibilities. This CD enables us to compare Johnson's unissued full version of the Jazzamine adagio with a truncated version issued as "**Blues for Jimmy**" (tracks ►

for Asch in this solo piano version, "possibly in 1944" (Hilbert). Perhaps Johnson and Asch planned a two-disc album (each section could fit on a 78 RPM side), but in fact the composer's solo version was not released until a 1962 LP, seven years after Johnson's death.

The first section derives from Bradford's and Spencer William's "Sam Jones Done Snagged His Britches," itself related to the spiritual "Every Time I Feel the Spirit." "Georgia's Always on My Mind" and a restatement of the "Sam Jones" theme appear in the fast final section, which culminates in a coda

with distinct references to *Rhapsody in Blue*. Gershwin's 1923 success with an extended jazz-related work was clearly in mind; Bradford's Foreword to the published version states, "This is not a *Rhapsody in Blue*, but a rhapsody in black and white (Black notes on White paper)."

Bradford's effort to document other traditional sources in *Yamekraw* proved inconclusive. Although Johnson used traditional sources, this solo version testifies to his intent to write a "classical" work. His statement of the first theme in majestic chords is an exam-

12, 20). The CD contains both unissued (3:41) and issued (2:23) versions of "The Dream" (tracks 7, 8), as well as "Woman Blues" that lasts 3:47 (track 11).

Lest such complaints blur the picture of Moe Asch's achievement, let me say that neither disorganization nor an occasional error can detract from his unparalleled creation of some 2,200 albums of music from all parts of the world, all kept in print. In recording Johnson, in allowing him to choose his selections, and in giving him freedom to choose his band for the group sides (to be issued in a separate Smithsonian Folkways CD), Moses Asch was giving just recognition to a giant of jazz artistry.

The Career of James P. Johnson (1894-1955)

AS A YOUNGSTER, JAMES P. JOHNSON WAS exposed to the three formative musical sources that would shape his career. In his native New Brunswick, New Jersey, the child left his bed to listen and watch his parents and their friends—many recently moved from the South—sing and dance to

ple of this intent, as are descending chord passages and frequent key modulations. *Yamekraw* was turned into a Vitaphone movie short in 1930, but Johnson, though credited as composer, neither appeared in the film nor performed for its soundtrack. A white studio band, Hugo Marianni and His Mediterraneans, performed a reduced score (the film is three minutes shorter than Johnson's performance here). Johnson may well have had doubts about the Prodigal Son plot superimposed on his music: the hero leaves his family and sweetheart in *Yamakraw* to seek

success in a Northern city, falls prey to evil company and habits, and returns, chastened but wiser, to his simple homestead. Johnson was deeply influenced by Southern Black music from earliest childhood and celebrated it in *Yamekraw* and elsewhere, but he was a lifelong metropolitan urbanite, a product of the Harlem Renaissance, whose goals were better described in the 1945 Carnegie Hall program: "Johnson's seriousness, dignity, and critical awareness—qualities that define a rich and mature personality—are felt in his concert compositions on this program."



ring-shouts (based on African traditions carried over into Southern church music), secular square dances, and cotillion music. His Virginia-born mother was his first piano teacher. Later, in the tough neighborhoods of Jersey City and Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen (the Black neighborhood called "The Jungles," now the cultured West Side area of Lincoln Center), he heard ragtime and blues played by the often disreputable pianists known as "ticklers." **"The Dream"** and **"Euphonic Sounds"** (tracks 8 and 16) are recollections of music he heard then. A third musical source—one that shaped his later ambitions—was classical music; he attended concerts in New York and sang in his still-high soprano voice in Haydn's *Creation*. He also studied for four years with a classical piano and voice teacher, Bruto Giannini, who helped him improve his fingering and general technique but did not discourage his already professional competence in rags and blues.

By 1913 he had begun to play professionally; by 1917 he was making piano rolls; and by 1921 he recorded what many consider the first jazz solo piano disc, his own "Harlem Strut," for the Black Swan record label. Like Jelly Roll Morton in New Orleans, he took the sedate, formalized ragtime and created from it a freer jazz piano style—one capable of swing and open to improvisation.

6 Twenty-six years—from July 1917 to July 1943—passed between Johnson's recordings of his well-named 1914 composition **DAINTINESS RAG**. This is one of an amazing group of works by the twenty-year-old composer that included his better-known "Carolina Shout" and "Caprice Rag" (at about this time, Johnson was just learning to write out his music). The 1917 effort was one of his first piano rolls; the 1943 cut heard here was his only take for the Asch label. Despite the gap in recording dates, "Daintiness" was part of the composer's repertory he trea-

sured and worked constantly to improve. The three-theme, 16-bar structure of 1917 is retained, but the AABACC structure is here simplified, after a 4-bar introduction, into AABBC, with more variety in the second B section and an altered C built on a descending chromatic progression rather than an ascending scale.

7, 8 **THE DREAM** was by far the earliest source in Johnson's historical survey of jazz sources for Asch, heard here in two renditions never before issued. Jesse Pickett,

He became the "father of stride piano," which derived its name from the left hand's rhythmic jumps between single deep bass notes and chords in the center of the keyboard.

In the hands of Johnson, stride could be full of variety, with the left hand's temporary interruptions of its own regularity and the right's accenting of the rhythms, now with powerful chords, more often with graceful embellishments. He had listened carefully to all the competition, borrowed and improved their ideas, and soon was capable of "a trick a minute." Critic Tom Piazza sums it up: "Johnson was a master at varying his left-hand patterns, suggesting all kinds of polyrhythms and countermelodies. His technique was awesome, and his swing overpowering." Historian Marshall Stearns commented, "It was as if Franz Liszt had discovered ragtime." Johnson had become, as he called himself, the "Dean of Jazz Pianists." He was the dominant figure during the 1920s at Harlem's rent parties and competitive cutting contests. He was one of the first Black artists signed by recording companies and by the leading QRS piano roll firm (George Gershwin was a contemporary employee).

He was a model for younger pianists—Fats Waller, to whom he was a surrogate father figure, Duke Ellington, and Cliff Jackson, who all learned his style by pumping Johnson's piano rolls ▶

a sometime pimp and gambler, may have composed it by 1890 and taught it to Eubie Blake in Baltimore, perhaps in 1896 or 1897.

Johnson, eleven years younger than Blake, is thought to have heard it from its composer in New York, though in a 1953 interview James P. wrongly attributes it to "Jack the Bear" (John Wilson), who played it often. The song has lyrics and at least five alternate titles with lesbian connotations, allegedly because it was a favorite of women employed in sporting houses. Johnson reluctantly sang some bawdy lyrics as "The Bull Diker's Dream" at the urging of

folklorist Alan Lomax during a 1938 interview at the Library of Congress (never issued).

"The Dream" is a "slow drag" with a tango bass rhythm, much in the mood of Jelly Roll Morton's "The Crave." Johnson, not usually identified with Latin rhythms, clearly liked the tune (without lyrics), because he recorded it repeatedly for Asch: three takes with his five-piece New York Orchestra in June 1944 and four solo takes in the "possibly May 1945" set responsible for these two tracks. One take was a breakdown. Another (track 7 here) was apparently set aside and forgotten because it

slowly to copy his fingerings as the mechanism depressed each key. Johnson's influence is apparent in later pianists, not only those like Dick Wellstood and Ralph Sutton, experts at Johnson's repertory, but also Count Basie (who studied with Waller), Art Tatum (who met Johnson as early as 1923), Teddy Wilson, Erroll Garner, John Lewis, and Thelonious Monk, who heard a playback of his blues, "Functional," and commented, "I sound just like James P. Johnson." Johnson's style represented the aspirations of the Harlem Renaissance; a *New York Times* review by Peter Watrous of a Ralph Sutton performance in 1991 said:

Stride piano overflows with optimism...a pre-World War II era free of the 20th century's worst disasters—an era of possibility...motion and movement signaled a type of freedom, and the spiky, abrupt right-hand interjections, working as melodies, exemplified the new musical vocabulary that developed in the early decades of this century.

Johnson was more than a virtuoso player. By about 1914, he was creating widely imitated tunes, including the test piece for young stride pianists, "Carolina Shout," and two rags first cut onto piano

was too long for a 10-inch 78 RPM disc. The others, for unknown reasons, were released only in edited or speeded-up versions. Johnson's two insinuating performances on this CD are therefore his first accurately recorded performances of this early piece, versions which can profitably, and enjoyably, be compared with several far more recent recordings by his old friend Eubie Blake.

9 Johnson's three BLUE MOODS solos appear to be purely an outgrowth of his recordings for Folkways; they were never pub-

lished or recorded elsewhere. Hilbert's discography places them tentatively as the second of three "possibly 1944" (and presumably consecutive) sessions done for Asch. Unreleased until the LP era, the "Blue Moods" improvisations were combined with another "possibly 1944" session: Johnson's accompaniment of six W. C. Handy songs sung by the composer's daughter, Katherine Handy Lewis. "Blue Moods 1" differs as a blues improvisation from "Blue Moods, Sex" (track 15). After an eight-bar introduction, six choruses—varied but more definitively demarcated by the 12-bar

rolls and included here: "Daintiness Rag" and "Twilight Rag" (tracks 6, 17). His compositions totalled over 300; Scott Brown lists 280 songs, excluding 19 extended concert works (many of them lost entirely or in part) and songs from shows and revues Johnson participated in but whose authorship is uncertain. As composer, solo pianist, expert accompanist to singers, occasional bandleader, and sideman, Johnson made 55 piano rolls and some 400 record sides (some released only after his death). Like his student and protégé Waller, Johnson probably wrote more than we know or will ever know.

Like Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle, Johnson produced many of his compositions for popular all-Black stage musicals, politically incorrect today with their stereotyped depictions of African Americans shooting dice, rolling their eyes, or happily singing about plantation life. Johnson wrote scores for 11 such stage presentations and contributed as partial composer, musical director, or performer to twice that number (Brown 1986). His biggest success was undoubtedly *Runnin' Wild* in 1923, with two perennial hits, "Old Fashioned Love" and "Charleston"; the latter triggered the national dance craze forever identified with terms like Jazz Age, Flaming Youth, and Roaring

divisions than "Blues Moods, Sex"—trail off into an 8-bar tag. Johnson's right hand is typically inventive, much of the time against a loping bass with a southwestern blues feeling.

10 KEEP MOVIN' is especially valuable historically, because it revives an obscure number from Johnson's 1923 Broadway hit, *Runnin' Wild*. This cheerful piece of perpetual motion is driven by a steady syncopation in the right hand which sometimes moves to the bass. Asch issued on LP a calmer, slightly longer rendition which is

marred by a couple of slipped notes. The alternate take here suggests that Johnson wanted another attempt, both smoother and brisker. This version has an AAABB-(2-bar interlude)-A structure and slows during the final A in the manner of jazz depictions of trains coming to a halt.

11 If there is a mystery in the valuable but often ambiguous Asch files, it is this track, never before released and here presented (pending further information) as WOMAN BLUES. It is probably Hilbert's matrix MA 1249,

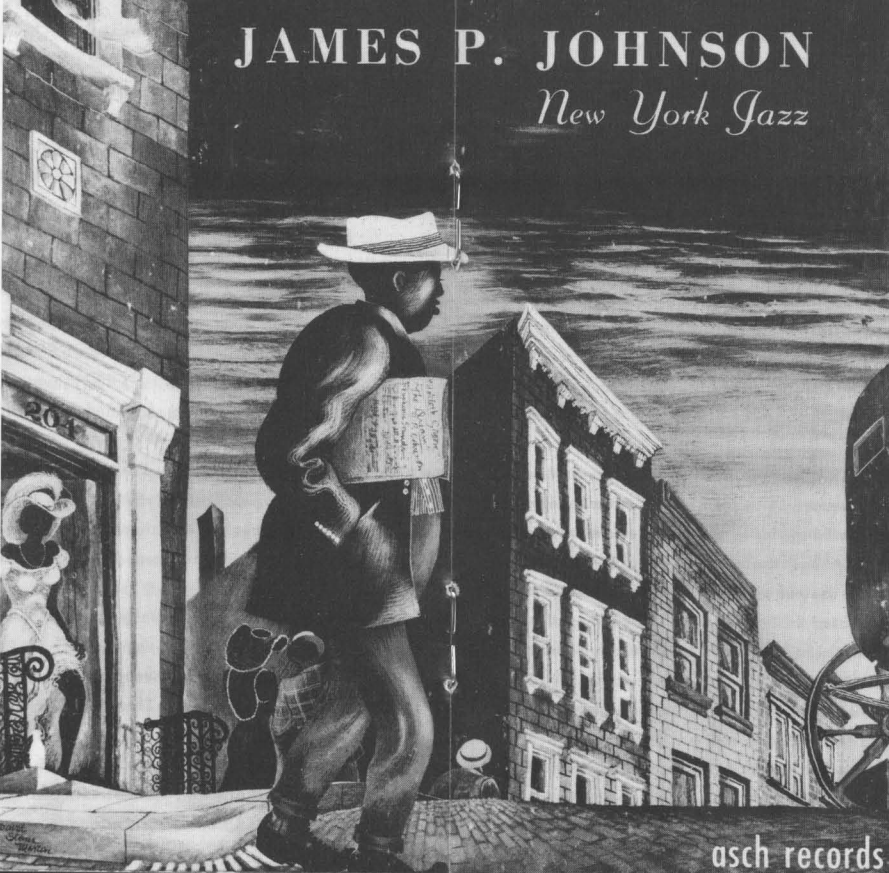
Twenties. (Johnson recorded Charleston twice on piano rolls but for some reason never as a solo on disc.) Typically, for Asch he made his only recordings of another number from *Runnin' Wild*, "Keep Movin'" (track 10).

Good pianists often had to accompany singers, and Johnson was the favorite of two very different divas of the day, Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters. Their collaborations remain in print today. His 14 tracks with Smith between 1927 and 1929 include four of his own songs. He recorded only four songs with Waters, a great shame considering her opinion of him: "All the licks you hear, now as then, originated with musicians like

one of two titles ("Euphonic Sounds" is the other), played as solos on a band date of 12 June 1944. MA 1249 appears in Asch's files only as a question mark, the only untitled performance in Hilbert's painstaking discography. This otherwise untitled acetate in the Smithsonian Folkways archive bears an undated, handwritten notation, "Woman Blues." Although clearly a Johnson performance, no such title appears in Scott Brown's list of his compositions, Hilbert's list of his recorded performances, or in a number of other title references. Given its 3:47 length, too long for

JAMES P. JOHNSON

New York Jazz



asch records

James P. Johnson....The rest of the hot piano boys...are just followers and protegés of that great man, Jimmy Johnson."

In 1928, Johnson had his first and as it turned out his greatest success as a composer in extended classical forms, *Yamekraw—A Negro Rhapsody*. Orchestrated by the noted African-American composer, William Grant Still, it had its premiere at Carnegie Hall with Waller as soloist (Johnson was conducting a musical, and the producers refused to give him the night off to perform *Yamekraw*). In his lifetime, Johnson's only recording was the solo version he made for Asch (track 5), but *Yamekraw* was played by ▶

a 10-inch 78, Asch may simply have stored and forgotten what seems to be an attractive slow blues improvisation. A very simple theme—mainly the repetition of a single note—is introduced first in chords, then triplets, first in a 10-bar chorus and second in a full 12-bar chorus. It is pursued a bit tentatively in the next chorus and then elaborated with Johnson's customary aplomb for five strong choruses. Like the two "Blue Moods" (tracks 9 and 15), this lets us witness Johnson in action as an on-the-spot creator of blues variations.

several orchestras. With Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* in mind, Johnson saw himself as a pioneer of what would later be called "Third Stream Music," i.e., musical blends of jazz with European-derived concert music. Like Duke Ellington, he was thinking of jazz as the basis for extended works; like Ellington, he continually faced frustration in a society unwilling to see Black jazz artists as "serious" performers in the same class as Paul Whiteman and George Gershwin. But unlike Duke Ellington, Johnson lacked an orchestra as a base for live performances of his concert works.

In 1930, Johnson moved his family to Queens and devoted himself primarily to writing concert music. On the one hand, he felt that the Depression and the coming of radio and talking movies limited the opportunities Black entertainers had enjoyed in the 1920s. On the other hand, his past successes as composer and performer provided income to support his family.

As a result, Johnson effectively disappeared from the jazz scene. Hilbert's discography tells the story. In the 14 years between 1917 and 1930, he had 115 piano roll or phonograph sessions and issued an average of 16 commercial performances annually. Between 1931 and 1937, there were only eight sessions, none of them solos, and 28 commercial sides—four a year, mostly as a sideman for

12 The adagio second movement of the piano **JAZZAMINE CONCERTO** (1934) was recorded by the composer as a solo in 1945. Its six-minute length prevented the release of this fine example of Johnson's symphonic efforts of the 1930s until now. Johnson copyrighted the work in 1934, under the name *Jassamine* (it is also known as *Concerto Jazz-A-Mine*, *Jasmine*, and *Piano Concerto in A-flat*), and published the adagio in this piano solo version in 1947. The first and third movements were presumed lost, but, with the cooperation of Johnson's family, orchestrated

scores of the first and second movements were recovered some 45 years after this long-neglected performance was recorded. To salvage at least the main themes and structure of the second movement, Johnson recorded a truncated 2:52 version, suitable for a 10-inch 78 RPM side (track 20), under the misleading title "Blues for Jimmy." While Asch's acetate recording of the full movement was broken into two sections with a slight overlap, here it has been lovingly edited into a unified performance. Johnson's solo has six main sections, several with a waltz-like inflection, linked by

Clarence Williams's Orchestra.

Despite a lack of jazz performance, Johnson's activities as a composer continued, though the works he produced were largely neglected. There was a Carnegie Hall concert featuring some of this music in May 1945, but his appeals for grant support created a file of rejections. Portions or entire works were eventually lost, including virtually all of his opera, *De Organizer*, with a libretto by Langston Hughes, which had a single union-sponsored Carnegie Hall performance. The products of this period include his *Symphony Harlem*, *African Drums* (cf. track 14), **Jazzamine Concerto** (cf. tracks 12, 20), *Symphonic Suite on the St. Louis Blues*, *Fantasia in C-minor*, *Sonata in C*, *Sonata in F*, two tone poems, plus scores for three operettas and two ballets.

Johnson enjoyed a rediscovery in 1938 and 1939, largely because his memory remained alive among devotees. He recorded band and trio sides with Pee Wee Russell. French critic Hugues Panassié recruited Johnson for parts of two 1938 recording sessions, and said, "I was pleased with the results, especially with James P. Johnson." Johnson also participated in John Hammond's all-star *Spirituals to Swing* events in Carnegie Hall. Hammond, an enthusiast, organized a 1939 recording ►

several transitional sections: a lyrical melody following the AABA structure of the popular song; a series of classically influenced runs and arpeggios serving as a substantial transition; a blues chorus ending in a shorter transition; and the original theme as the basis for three more jazz-oriented variations (the second hinting at the "Charleston" rhythm), ending in a final adagio restatement.

13 Johnson loved Handy's music, and no doubt was playing **ST. LOUIS BLUES** soon after its publication in 1914. Yet it is

typical of the valuable Johnson-Asch collaboration that this is his only piano solo of the piece recorded on disc, although there are four other preserved performances. Johnson led the jazz band which accompanied Bessie Smith in her only film (*St. Louis Blues*, 1929), and he soloed, behind dialogue, in Paul Robeson's film, *The Emperor Jones* (1933); typical of his modesty (or bad luck), James P. Johnson is seen only from the back in each film. He accompanied Katherine Handy Lewis's singing of her father's songs for Asch ("possibly 1944"), and he was recorded as

session with Johnson as leader of his own works, but these marvelous sides were deemed lacking in commercial appeal and languished until the LP era. Eventually 12 sessions during these two years led to some 60 releases on LP, including alternate takes.

What biographer Scott Brown calls the "Johnson Renaissance" of the 1940s may be dated to his first session with Asch, a solo session on 2 July 1942 that produced four 78 sides. Other solo and group opportunities for other companies followed, some with superb results. By the middle of 1945, he had completed nine studio sessions for Moses Asch, comprising about 40 sides. In the five-year period, 1942 to 1945, Johnson's other studio dates, recorded live concerts, airchecks, and releases of alternate takes totalled 46 events. These led to over 220 issued recordings, including alternates, or about 44 releases a year. Many, of course, were group sides or duplicative material, but Johnson, still frustrated as a symphonic composer, was once more a productive jazzman.

By the time Johnson's "renaissance" began, he had suffered the first of a series of strokes, though it did not affect his playing. He continued to play until 1951, when a final stroke made him an invalid. In 1955, only 75 persons attended his funeral, and John Hammond lamented his passing:

pianist in an octet playing "St. Louis Blues" on a 1947 radio broadcast.

Johnson does something unusual with this single take for Asch in 1945 (May?); he offers it in boogie woogie style. We may assume Johnson knew and admired Earl Hines's classic "Boogie Woogie on the St. Louis Blues." Johnson certainly does not imitate Hines (e.g., no sustained right-hand tremolo), but he recognized the appeal of this particular blues-based style in the early 1940s. During the period he was recording for Asch, he wrote and recorded "J.P. Boogie"

and recorded "Improvisations on Pinetop's Boogie" for Blue Note, and, in 1943-44, published his "Boogie Dreams," "Boogie Woogie Runaway," and "Boogie Woogie Stride." In commercial terms, then, this boogie possibly represents James P. Johnson's recognizing (as he put it in a song title) that "You've Got to Be Modernistic," but he plays it beautifully.

14 JUNGLE DRUMS was the third of Johnson's symphonic works recorded for Asch, but, unlike *Yamekraw* and the *Jazzamine Concerto*, it did not receive a full solo piano ren-

He should have been among the most famous and successful of men. Let us hope that future generations will make up for our lack of appreciation.

Recent years have done much to fulfill Hammond's hope. In the early 1980s, Johnson was among the pre-bop figures honored in a wonderfully annotated set (now out-of-print) by Time-Life. Frank H. Trolle's discography came out in 1981, and Scott E. Brown's biography (joined to Robert Hilbert's discography) was published in 1986. Some of Johnson's works, long feared lost, were rediscovered with the assistance of Johnson's surviving family and the staff of the Concordia Orchestra of New York City. They were performed at an all-Johnson concert at Avery Fisher Hall in Lincoln Center early in 1992; a centennial celebration in New Brunswick, New Jersey, included a conference on his works and career and a ballet, *Carolina Shout*, premiered by the American Repertory Ballet. The composer's grandson, Barry Glover, Jr., has formed a James P. Johnson Foundation to encourage music education in California. Most of all, the arrival of the CD format has made Johnson's performances, other artists' performances of his work, and a sampling of his symphonic efforts far more ►

dition. Instead, it parallels "Blues for Jimmy" (track 20) as a greatly reduced (2:33) version of an orchestral work, now happily discovered and recorded by the Concordia Orchestra (at 9:17) as *Drums—A Symphonic Poem*. Its history is both elaborate and obscure. Johnson may have composed a tune called "Drums" with lyrics by Andy Razaf for a 1932 stage show, but it was not published with other songs from that show and reverted to the composer and lyricist in 1938. Johnson orchestrated it, perhaps about 1942, and perhaps as part of a longer three-movement work called *Rhythm*

Drums. Eventually Langston Hughes wrote new lyrics to the music in his poem *Those Jungle Drums*. This recording gives us the composer's own performance, much shortened but stating its two key themes framed by an emphatic drum motif. Though he was no musicologist, Johnson attempted to suggest an African feeling with a minor key and an insistent rhythm accenting the second and fourth beats.

15 BLUE MOODS, SEX has no apparent sexual context (indeed, it is not known who attached so provocative a title; the piece

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



accessible (see the appended discography).

Because Johnson's interest in history and tradition was so deeply expressed in his selections for Moses Asch, one can only assume that he would enjoy the eclecticism of today's jazz scene. When the bebop revolution stirred antagonism among many jazz traditionalists, musicians and fans alike, Johnson commented favorably on Dizzy Gillespie. He predicted what one might call the age of Wynton Marsalis (and his peers), an era when jazz history would become a staple in college curricula, and major cultural centers would create their own jazz ensembles—in short, an age when jazz would become a repertory music. James P. Johnson prophesied in 1947:

In the classics, different scholars have added, from time to time, new theoretical harmonic effects. Up to very recently that hadn't been done in jazz. What Dizzy and his kind play is simply a new treatment of jazz....I agree the music is revolutionary, but it's still the basic thing that counts....The most important point that I can see is that the jazz musicians of the future will have to play all different kinds of jazz—in all its treatments—just like the classical musician who, in one concert, might range from Bach to Copland. ■

appeared simply as "Theme" on a British LP). Instead, it is a beautifully flowing set of blues improvisations, distinct from "Blue Moods 1" (track 9) but almost identical to the slightly shorter, less developed "Blue Moods 2" (not on this disc). "Blue Moods, Sex" has a brief introduction leading into nine intricately varied 12-bar choruses. The second chorus suggests the theme of the traditional "My Bucket's Got a Hole in It," but "Blue Moods, Sex" is essentially a masterful exercise in blues improvisation, with ideas flowing across chorus boundaries, and a gently fading excur-

sion into the minor during the last eight bars.

16 Scott Joplin's EUPHONIC SOUNDS was part of Johnson's salute to early musical sources in his Asch/Folkways recordings. Joplin copyrighted and published the rag in 1909 as "A Syncopated Novelty" and "A Syncopated Two Step" and incorporated it onto a two-rag piano roll medley the same year. However, Johnson's June 1944 recordings, done 35 years later, are believed to be the first phonograph recordings of this late and challenging Joplin masterpiece. On the Folkways LP,

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"Euphonic Sounds" has drum accompaniment, and a trumpeter enters very tentatively at the end—perhaps it is a "re-hearsal" take (Trolle 1981). This CD track, however, is Johnson's solo effort. It follows Joplin's structure but has embellishments characteristic of ragtime performances by early masters of jazz improvisation like Johnson, Jelly Roll Morton, and Sidney Bechet. Joplin's form has a recurring first theme, perhaps influenced by the Euro-pean rondo. It is a series of 16-bar sections: AABBA. Johnson, despite a rare slipped note at the start of the first B,

enlivens the B sections of the printed score with delicate embellishments, 32nd-note runs, and a 4-bar tag. Johnson knew the age of this material, but he clearly did not consider this an archeological dig; in his words, "Joplin was fifty years ahead of his time. Even today, who understands 'Euphonic Sounds?' It's really modern" (quoted in Blesh and Janis 1971).

17 TWILIGHT RAG was recorded on only two occasions by Johnson, a 1917 piano roll and two takes at an Asch session in 1945. The piano roll was a duet (Edwin E. Wilson

Discography

ALL REFERENCES ARE TO CDS, ALPHABETICAL BY LABEL.

I denotes imports; O denotes CDs of all-Johnson compositions played by other than Johnson; J denotes discs with other artists but with significant tracks by Johnson as soloist or accompanist.

- Biograph 105. *Carolina Shout* (piano rolls)
- Blue Note CDP 7243. *Reminiscing* (1943 solos) J
- CBS 465651. *James P. Johnson: From Ragtime to Jazz* (1921-39 solos)
- Classics. *The Chronological James P. Johnson series* (each with solos and bands): 558 (1921-28), 671 (1928-38), 711 (1938-42), 824 (1943-44), 835 and 856 (1944) I
- Classics 688. *Ethel Waters, 1926-29* (accompaniments) IJ
- Columbia/Legacy C2K 47474, 52838: *Bessie Smith: the Complete Recordings, vols. 3-4* (accompaniments, 1927, 1929) J

provided reticent support at the bass end). Like "Daintiness Rag," which had a similar quarter-century gap between recordings, "Twilight" was composed in 1914 or earlier. In a 1953 interview, Johnson recalled the rag's repeated "chimes effect in syncopation" and its role in winning him piano contests by 1914. Perhaps the chimes suggested the title; similar effects turn up later in better-known pieces by King Oliver and Duke Ellington. Later "Twilight" served Johnson as a competitive foil in cutting contests. Although both 1917 and 1945 versions have the usual three

themes, Johnson varied the structure considerably in 1945 to create a sparkling treatment, far more varied than the piano roll: a four-bar introduction followed by AABBA, with an altered C section repeated as inventive variations. This "Twilight Rag" revives a scarcely known but delightful Johnson composition. Thanks to Asch's encouragement, Johnson experimented with old and new repertory.

18,19 Johnson's devotion to his SNOWY MORNING BLUES was so intense that he recorded it on at least nine occasions over the

Decca GRD 604. *Snowy Morning Blues* (1930 and 1944 solos)

Halcyon 107. *Feelin' Blue* (solos and bands, 1927-31)

Hot'n Sweet. *James P. Johnson: Harlem Stride Piano, 1921-29* (solos and bands) I

MusicMasters 60066A. *The Symphonic Jazz of James P. Johnson* (solos by William Albright) O

MusicMasters 67140. *Victory Stride: The Symphonic Music of James P. Johnson* (Concordia Orchestra under Marin Alsop) O

About the Author

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DAVID CAYER IS COEDITOR OF the *Annual Review of Jazz Studies*, published by Rutgers University's Institute of Jazz Studies. For the Institute, he has narrated five two-hour radio programs on the music of James P. Johnson. With support from the New Jersey Council for the Humanities and Rutgers, he directed a 1994 symposium celebrating the centennial of Johnson's birth in his home town of New Brunswick.

two decades from February 1927 to June 1947—twice for Asch in July 1942 and “possibly July” 1943. Johnson's 1927 studio-recorded disc was cited by John Hammond—noted producer, promoter, and Johnson enthusiast—as crucial to Hammond's own commitment to jazz. Johnson's four takes for Asch were his only other studio opportunity; the other recordings were mostly from later live concerts or radio airchecks. Johnson wanted this studio opportunity because, in Moe Asch's words, “He kept trying to make [Snowy Morning] better.” “Snowy Morning” is not a blues, though its 16-

bar structure, after a 4-bar introduction, has a good deal of blues feeling. These performances offer a fascinating contrast. Track 18, the Folkways LP issue, is faster, longer (3:13), and concentrates on variations in the bass line—stride for about two-thirds, then a slow and gentle boogie bass accompanying a staccato right-hand, then alternating left-and-right-hand bass, and finally chords over a walking bass. Track 19 is considerably slower (and enjoys better sound), maintains a stately pace, with a steady, almost relentless, rhythmic bass balanced with a great variety of right-hand

About Smithsonian Folkways

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FOLKWAYS RECORDS WAS FOUNDED by Moses Asch and Marian Distler in 1948 to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. In the ensuing decades, New York City-based Folkways became one of the largest independent record labels in the world, reaching a total of nearly 2,200 albums that were always kept in print.

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embellishments (Johnson might have said “a trick a minute”): tremolos, sweeping arpeggios, chromatic runs, grace notes, and chord progressions. Clearly Johnson never tired of finding something new to say about this lovely work.

20 **BLUES FOR JIMMY** is a poignant conclusion to this disc, for it stands simultaneously as fine pianism and as a measure of the frustration James P. Johnson must have felt at the continued neglect of the extended symphonic works to which he had devoted more than a decade of his life. This is an under-

three-minute reduction of the adagio movement of the *Jazzamine Concerto* (track 12). Although recorded at the same session (“possibly April 1945”) as Johnson's solo version of the adagio, only this shortened form was issued on the eventual LP. In 1945, with the time limits of the 78 rpm disc in mind, Johnson tried valiantly to summarize each of the major themes, but one can easily believe that the title, “Blues for Jimmy,” expresses his despair, at that late date, of ever hearing his pioneering Third Stream extended works in full orchestral performance.

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! TECHNICAL NOTE: "These historic recordings have been digitally transferred from the best available source material: original acetate masters, 78's, and analog tape safetys. After transfer to digital tape, reprocessing was accomplished through use of the Cedar de-clicker, greatly improving the sound quality over previous issues. However, because of the limitations of early recording techniques and the extreme differences in source materials due to deterioration through aging and wear, some of these selections may vary greatly in sound quality." —Kevin Doran

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- SF40067 *Lonnie Johnson:
The Complete Folkways Recordings*
- SF40051 *Blues by Roosevelt
"The Honeydripper" Sykes*

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Newly annotated by **David Cayer**

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"All the licks you hear,
now as then,
originated with musicians
like James P. Johnson....
the rest of
the hot piano boys...are
just followers and
protégés of that great
man, Jimmy Johnson."

—Ethel Waters

