



## James Price Johnson

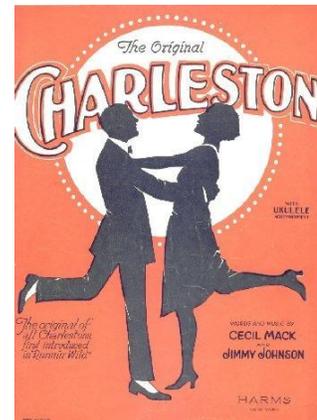
Musical genius and highly influential African American jazz pianist, **James Price Johnson**, was born in New Brunswick, New Jersey on February 1, 1894.

Johnson is most often credited with originating the uniquely East Coast style of piano playing known as “Stride,” and was a crucial figure in the transition from ragtime to jazz. As played by Johnson, stride piano, a development of ragtime, used two-beat left-hand rhythms to accompany right-hand melodies that featured uncommon interpretative variety.

James P. Johnson grew up to be an unassuming man with a gentle disposition. He had perfect pitch and a powerful left hand; he was a quick learner at the piano. Johnson said he would spend hours playing piano in a dark room to become completely familiar with the keyboard. He would sometimes put a bed sheet over the keyboard and force himself to play difficult pieces through the covering in order to develop his sense of touch. Johnson’s originality and virtuosity stand out over a century later.

In his lifetime, Johnson composed and recorded jazz tunes, show music, movie scores and major symphonic works. Johnson was the first African American artist to break through the color barrier and cut his own piano rolls for a major label. The great singer Ethel Waters said of him, “All the licks you hear now originated with James P. Johnson—and I mean *all* the hot licks that ever came out of Fats Waller and the rest of the hot piano boys; they’re all faithful followers and protégées of that great man, Jimmy Johnson.”

However, only a few pop tunes in the twentieth century have launched a dance craze as wild as “The Charleston,” a tune that still evokes images of Jazz Age flappers and Charlie Chaplin silent movies, bathtub gin and *The Great Gatsby*. The gentle genius who wrote “The Charleston”—James P. Johnson—remains all but invisible today and is rarely remembered by anyone except a handful of musicians. “The Charleston” was Johnson’s big hit, but he wrote many far more ambitious compositions.



Johnson became well established in the relatively small world of Harlem Stride Piano by the 1920s, when he took a talented teenager by the name of Fats Waller under his wing, gave him piano lessons and a home away from home. Fats Waller's bubbling show-biz personality captured the imagination of the nation, and he soon became swept up in the bright light of fame and fortune. A deep bond of affection remained between the two giants of stride piano until Waller's death at an early age. Johnson's influence can be readily heard in the Waller tune "Smashing Thirds."

In the 1920s Johnson accompanied top stars like Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters. He toured Europe with the *Plantation Revue*, and in 1923 composed the score for a hit Broadway show, *Runnin' Wild*. Two hit tunes came out of this show: The title tune, "Runnin' Wild," is often widely played by jazz and string bands today, and "The Charleston." Johnson recalled first seeing the Charleston danced at a dive called the Jungles Casino in New York in 1913. Johnson recalls: "*The Jungles was just a cellar without fixings. The people who came...were mostly from Charleston, South Carolina. Most of them worked...as longshoremen or on the ships. They danced hollering and screaming until they were cooked. They kept up all night or until their shoes wore off, most of them after a heavy day's work on the docks. The Charleston was a regulation cotillion step without a name. While I was playing for these Southern dancers, I composed a number of "Charlestons"—eight in all, all with that damn rhythm. One of these later became my famous "Charleston" on Broadway.*"

**James P. Johnson** may be thought of as both the last major pianist of the classic ragtime era and the first major jazz pianist. As such, he is considered an indispensable bridge between ragtime and jazz. Johnson died in New York City on November 17, 1955, however the stride musical style he introduced continues to reinvent music of every genre.

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Text based on:

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Encyclopaedia Britannica: James P. Johnson American Composer and Pianist