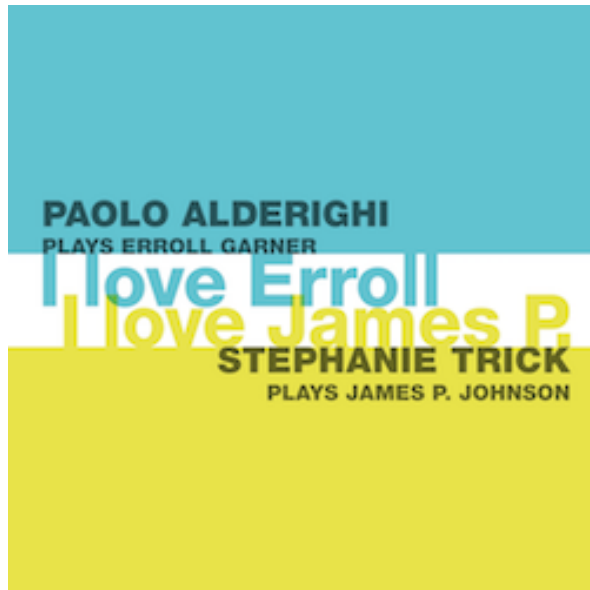


Stephanie Trick Plays James P. Johnson

Additional Liner Notes by Mark Borowsky



Disc 1 of double album, *I Love Erroll, I Love James P.*

Jingles: *Jingles* and *You've Got to Be Modernistic* were among the four tunes that Johnson recorded for the Brunswick label, on January 30, 1930. These numbers of Johnson's are arguably the two hardest swinging, as well as technically challenging stride piano solos that have ever been recorded, anywhere, by any one.

A Flat Dream: This was Johnson's first foray into the recording of boogie woogie. The genre was a particular favorite of three of Johnson's biggest supporters in the record business: Alfred Lion and Francis Wolff, who founded the Blue Note label, and John Hammond, the impresario who had been a major talent scout for Columbia. *A Flat Dream* was one of six Johnson solos which Hammond had recorded on June 14, 1939, as a supplement to the Carnegie Hall *From Spirituals to Swing* concerts of 1938

and 1939, which Hammond had organized, and in which Johnson was a featured performer.

The opening themes present Johnson's exquisite touch and ethereal take on the boogie genre. The final three choruses are stride improvisations on the closing theme. The full version of *A Flat Dream* therefore represents something of a compendium of the breadth of Johnson's jazz piano repertoire, as it existed at the time, and is an indication of his historical approach to jazz in general.

Aintcha Got Music: Johnson wrote prolifically for the musical theater. Among his best-known tunes, *Charleston* and *Old Fashioned Love* were featured in the smash Broadway hit, *Running Wild* (1923). *Ain'tcha Got Music* comes from the show *Harlem Hotcha* (the name derives from the Club Hotcha, a Harlem nightspot). There are two Johnson recordings of the tune, both thanks to the author and impresario Rudi Blesh.

Caprice Rag: This composition dates from the 1910s, when he was playing the piano in Atlantic City. Johnson made several piano rolls of the tune in 1918, and then a commercial sound recording for Columbia in 1923. In keeping with his historical consciousness, Johnson kept this piece in his repertoire over the years, making the first issued phonograph recording of it in 1943 for Blue Note.

You Can't Lose a Broken Heart: This lovely tune is the theme song from the Johnson and Fourney Miller show, *Sugar Hill*. Named after a well to do Harlem enclave, the tune was recorded by Billie Holiday as a duet with Louis Armstrong in the 1949, and by Tony Bennett and K.D. Lang, as a duet, in 2002!

Over the Bars (Steeple Chase Rag): This is another one of the titles that Jimmy recorded for his friend, Floyd Levin in 1949. He uses both titles to describe the tune. The initial recording was on piano roll in 1917, and Johnson made a commercial recording for Decca, in 1944. It is yet another demonstration of Johnson's roots in the ragtime era.

Toddlin': This is a simple blues put on wax by Johnson in 1923, which is rarely played or recorded.

A Porter's Love Song to a Chambermaid: Another Johnson standard, from a show called *Kitchen Mechanic's Review*, written together with the brilliant lyricist, Andy Razaf, who was also a frequent collaborator of Eubie Blake and Fats Waller. This was among the first tunes that Waller recorded with his group, shortly after signing a long-term contract with Victor.

Jersey Sweet (Just Before Daybreak): Johnson never recorded this for a major commercial label, the three extant versions having been done for Asch, an air check from an Eddie Condon town Hall concert in 1944, and a private recording from a concert at Hamilton College, in Clinton, New York, in 1947.

Riffs: As Dick Wellstood and Willa Rouder have pointed out in their liner notes for the *Time Life* Johnson collection, the title, as well as the coherence of the piece, suggest that this might be a medley of licks which Johnson had played over the years.

How Could You Put Me Down: Among those tunes in the Johnson songbook which is probably both the least well known and among the

prettiest. Composer and lyricist credit is shared with fellow tickler, Willie "The Lion" Smith.

Carolina Balmoral: By the time he was in his late teens, Johnson was already accomplished enough as a pianist to have developed something of a reputation in the environs of New Brunswick, New Jersey, where he was born, as well as in Atlantic City, where much work was to be found in the hotels and other social establishments of the Boardwalk. Jersey was also home to a substantial population of black migrants from Georgia and the Carolinas. As Johnson described to Rudi Blesh, on an episode of the radio program, *This Is Jazz*, these people, known as "Gullahs" or "Geechies," brought their traditional dances, north with them, to be displayed in social functions known as cotillions. It was as music to accompany these cotillion dances, that Johnson wrote several of his stride classics, *Carolina Shout* and *Carolina Balmoral* among them.

If I Could Be with You (One Hour Tonight): This is the song that established Johnson's reputation as a songwriter and secured his membership in ASCAP. It was his songwriting royalties that helped sustain him after he suffered a paralyzing stroke in 1951 until his death four years later. Perhaps his best-known version is the piano roll that he recorded as a duet with Waller in 1926.

Carolina Shout: This composition is to the liturgy of stride piano, what *Maple Leaf Rag* was to ragtime. *Maple Leaf Rag* would eventually sell over one million copies, and, at one cent per copy, make a small fortune for its composer Scott Joplin. Herein lies a major difference between stride and ragtime. Although there is a published version of *Carolina Shout*, Johnson did not make significant amounts of money from either the recorded or the published version. Where *Carolina Shout* became influential was in its

performed versions. Other pianists, Duke Ellington among them, would buy either the record, or the 1921 QRS piano roll, as an aide to learn to play the piece. They would then try it out in various cutting contests, competing against other pianists. The Johnson renditions of *Carolina Shout* were used as the gold standard to which other Harlem pianists would compare themselves. Waller played his version well enough for Johnson to accept the teenager as a student. Fats would later honor his teacher with his own recorded version in 1941. Although Johnson's 1921 Okeh recording remains the definitive version, we are fortunate to have six other recordings that Johnson managed to leave us, each different, and containing its own surprises.

Johnson's original conception was as a five-themed piano solo. Stephanie plays this reasonably "straight", then follows with an improvisation of her own, and repeats this pattern for each theme. The listener is thus treated to each of the themes plus a clever and logical variation. The end result is a completely unique recording, of this oft played, but rarely fully realized masterpiece of the stride genre.

Victory Stride: An orchestral composition, of which Johnson left us a recording, in 1944, through the graces of Alfred Lion at Blue Note.

Snowy Morning Blues: This is the tune, after *Carolina Shout*, which Johnson recorded more than any other. Interestingly, the Harlem Renaissance artist, Romare Bearden, whose mother, Bessye, was a friend of Johnson's, did two paintings (*Snow Morning* and *Carolina Shout*) that bear the titles of Johnson compositions. This association, along with his collaboration with Langston Hughes, place Johnson firmly within the intellectual circles of the Harlem Renaissance.

You've Got to Be Modernistic: Most pianists who have attempted to play *Modernistic* are either foolish, or crazy. These efforts usually do not end well. Notable exceptions to this rule have been Dick Hyman, Neville Dickie and Louis Mazetier. And now, Stephanie.

Old Fashioned Love: Another big hit from *Running Wild*, which Johnson recorded various times. He was the featured soloist with the Count Basie Orchestra, for their performances of both *Old Fashioned Love* and *If I Could Be With You* at *From Spirituals to Swing*.

Here we are treated to another wonderful duet, this time with and opportunity for Paolo to echo one of his heroes, the irrepressible Erroll Garner.

Keep off the Grass: This was the flip side of the Okeh 78 from the same October 18, 1921 session for which Johnson also originally recorded *Carolina Shout*. Johnson was the acknowledged king of the Harlem stride pianists for approximately fifteen years, from the late 1910s through the early 1930s. Eubie Blake, from the time that he first heard Johnson play on the Jersey shore, considered Johnson to be the finest pianist he ever heard.

Fans of Stephanie will recognize the piece as the musical accompaniment for *Rules of the Park*, which Stephanie recorded with the Grammy-nominated lyricist and vocalist Lorraine Feather for their *Nouveau Stride* duo album, *Fourteen* (2012). Both of Stephanie's versions would stand up to scrutiny in any cutting contest. I have no doubt that had she hit the scene in 1920, or if Johnson and Waller were alive today, they would welcome her most enthusiastically into their inner Harlem Stride sanctum.

Mark Borowsky

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