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PIONEERS OF JAZZ: FORMATION OF THE PIANO SCHOOL AND EVOLUTION OF STYLE

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Abstract: This article examines the evolution of jazz piano from ragtime to early jazz and stride, highlighting the contributions of key figures of this period – Jelly Roll Morton, James P. Johnson, Willie "Lion" Smith, Earl Hines, Fats Waller, Joe Sullivan, and Art Tatum – to the development of technique, rhythm, and improvisation. It also underscores the historical continuity of the genre and the enduring significance of these musicians for contemporary jazz piano.

Keywords: jazz, piano, ragtime, stride, early jazz, jazz pioneers, improvisation.

Throughout the 20th century and continuing into the present day, the development of jazz piano performance has not only reflected the evolution of jazz itself but has also actively influenced its further formation, establishing the piano as one of the central instruments of the genre. Thanks to its remarkably wide range of expressive possibilities, the instrument finds extensive application both in solo and ensemble contexts, forming the harmonic, rhythmic, and melodic foundation of jazz music. In jazz, the piano has become a symbol of creative self-expression, providing performers with ample space for experimentation and the exploration of new forms of musical expression.

In classical music, major stylistic changes typically occurred gradually, often taking many years, reflecting the natural pace of development and transformation within musical traditions. Jazz, however, evolved with striking rapidity: new styles emerged within a span of just one or two decades, and sometimes even more quickly. Each new style not only mirrored the spirit of its time but also became a platform for creative experimentation, occasionally radically transforming prevailing conceptions of jazz.

This article presents the pianists of early jazz – those whose creativity marked the transition from notated ragtime to the early jazz piano school, founded on improvisation, rhythmic freedom, and individuality of expression. Their journey was truly a path through thorns to the stars – both for the masters of ragtime and for the first jazz pianists who followed in their footsteps. At the turn of the 20th century, ragtime was both celebrated for its originality and condemned by musical conservatives, who dismissed it as "unmusical chatter." Yet this seemingly light and playful genre became the foundation for the development of jazz thought. Its leading figures – Scott Joplin, James Scott, and Joseph Lamb – left an indelible mark on the evolution of piano performance. The same struggle awaited the early jazz pianists, who inherited ragtime's rhythmic drive but sought to move beyond its notated form, breathing into music the living spirit of improvisation. Their art became the next step in the evolution of American piano performance – a step from mechanical precision to emotional freedom, from fixed notation to spontaneous inspiration. Thus, overcoming misunderstanding, criticism, and doubt, they elevated piano jazz to the level of true art, preserving within it the courage, energy, and creative spark of their ragtime predecessors. Early jazz, which followed ragtime, was a period of rapid development in piano artistry. Leading pianists of this era actively experimented with rhythm, harmony, and improvisation, creating the foundation for future jazz styles.

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It was during this transitional period, in the first quarter of the 20th century, that early jazz – or New Orleans jazz – emerged, becoming the first clearly identifiable style of jazz. It grew out of the marching brass bands that were widely present on the city's musical scene. Its history is usually traced back to 1895, when the earliest jazz sounds were associated primarily with the music of Buddy Bolden, Kid Ory, and Jelly Roll Morton, performed in the Storyville district until around 1917.

However, not all jazz at the beginning of the 20th century can be categorized as New Orleans jazz or Dixieland. From the early decades of the century, jazz — enriched by the influence of dance orchestras and virtuosic soloists – developed rapidly, evolving into fully improvisational music. Stride pianists, early jazz vocalists, and brass and wind soloists of that era are often difficult to classify precisely. Their work is frequently labeled as "classic" or "traditional" jazz, but regardless of terminology, the sound worlds they created laid the foundation for later styles, including the Kansas City and Chicago schools, as well as swing.

Among the brilliant pianists of that era, Jelly Roll Morton (1890–1941) stands out not only as a performer but also as one of the first musicians to codify and organize the improvisational practices of New Orleans jazz, bridging the gap between ragtime, early jazz, and the emerging jazz piano and ensemble styles.

Morton's approach combined the rhythmic drive of ragtime with the improvisational freedom of early jazz, creating compositions that were both structured and inventive.

Morton claimed that he "invented" jazz. Raised in the famous Storyville district of New Orleans, Morton played from a young age in venues where European melodies, African-American rhythms, and Caribbean musical traditions converged. He was also among the first to record jazz music, helping to spread it widely. His composition Jelly Roll Blues, published in 1915, is considered one of the first jazz compositions in history.

In this piece, the characteristic combination of bluesy intonations and the syncopated, "ragged" rhythm typical of early New Orleans style – largely inherited from ragtime – is already evident. Morton's performance style was distinguished by virtuosity and a unique sense of swing. According to contemporaries, he could effortlessly change the mood within a single piece, blending playful, almost carnival-like fragments with prolonged blues themes.

Jelly Roll Blues quickly gained popularity: it was performed and recorded by various orchestras, and Morton repeatedly returned to this composition in his performances and recording sessions. By the 1920s, as jazz began to spread beyond New Orleans, Jelly Roll Blues became one of Morton's "calling cards," confirming his status as one of the most influential pioneers of the genre. Morton's legacy continues to inspire musicians today, and Jelly Roll Blues remains in the repertoire of many jazz ensembles, preserving the sound of jazz's earliest tradition.

While Morton helped shape the collective and ensemble-based aspects of early jazz, the evolution of piano playing as a solo and virtuosic art form took a decisive step forward with James P. Johnson (1894–1955). An outstanding American pianist and composer, Johnson is recognized as one of the pioneers of stride piano in jazz. His virtuosic technique and innovative approach to piano performance had a major impact on the development of jazz in the first half of the 20th century. Johnson composed numerous popular works, including The Charleston, widely regarded as the unofficial anthem of the "Roaring Twenties." Throughout the 1930s, he remained the acknowledged king of New York jazz pianists, bridging the energy of early jazz with the emerging sophistication of stride.

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Johnson was a classically trained musician who, in addition to his popular jazz works, also composed pieces in the classical academic style. His composition Yamekraw: A Negro Rhapsody was performed at Carnegie Hall in 1928, marking a significant event that blended elements of jazz and classical music. He was also a leading pianist and innovator of the "Shout Piano" style, developing its technical performance techniques and influencing subsequent jazz piano genres.

His performances became benchmarks for aspiring jazz pianists. Duke Ellington often referenced Johnson's compositions, such as Carolina Shout and Keep Off the Grass, which served as "testing pieces" for pianists seeking recognition in the jazz community. These works were considered measures of technical skill, and performing them demonstrated a pianist's level of mastery. Composed in the early 1920s during Harlem's musical heyday, Carolina Shout exemplifies a distinctive piano style featuring a moving left-hand bass and bright, syncopated right-hand improvisations. Notably, Fats Waller, even as a young musician, diligently practiced Carolina Shout to gain the attention of experienced players. The piece eventually entered the "golden canon" of jazz piano classics and continues to be performed at traditional jazz festivals.

Although Willie "The Lion" Smith was one of the central figures of Harlem's vibrant musical scene in the 1920s, performing alongside such legends as James P. Johnson and Fats Waller, his recorded legacy remained relatively modest until the mid-1930s. His pianistic style — refined, picturesque, and rich in subtle nuances – stood in striking contrast to his public persona: the ever-present bowler hat, a cigar between his teeth, and an air of unyielding toughness. His artistic individuality and melodic imagination found their fullest expression in a remarkable cycle of fourteen solo recordings made on January 10, 1939, eight of which were his own compositions. Pieces such as Echoes of Spring, Passionette, Rippling Waters, and Morning Air reveal a rare synthesis of lyrical sensitivity and dazzling virtuosity, making them singular within the stride piano tradition of their time.

Earl Hines (1903–1983) holds a distinguished place in the history of jazz as an innovator whose playing combined immense energy with artistic daring. His distinctive technique was marked by brilliant octave passages that could cut through the dense texture of any ensemble, and an unpredictable left hand that infused his music with improvisational freedom and rhythmic tension. Hines often disrupted conventional meter, introducing dramatic pauses and bold rhythmic breaks, yet always returned to the precise pulse – a quality that made his performances both gripping and alive.

His style retained a sense of modernity and freshness throughout his career – from his first recordings in the late 1920s to his performances in the 1970s. The album The Earl Hines Collection: Piano Solos 1928–1940 (Collector's Classics) stands as vivid proof of his virtuosity and creative vitality, uniting all 14 of his 1928 solo works with ten later pieces from the swing era. Among the most expressive are 57 Varieties, Chicago High Life, A Monday Date, Rosetta, and A Child of a Disordered Brain – each showcasing Hines's inventiveness, emotional depth, and unmistakable artistic signature.

Fats Waller (1904–1943): A student of James P. Johnson, Waller became a virtuoso of stride piano, bringing elements of humor and lightness to jazz music. He gained fame not only as a brilliant pianist but also as a talented composer and showman, known for lively and effortless performances. Waller's popular compositions, such as Ain't Misbehavin' and Honeysuckle Rose, became jazz standards and are still widely performed today, epitomizing classic jazz. Thomas "Fats" Waller was a phenomenal musician, proficient not only on piano but also organ, violin, and double bass. Additionally, he composed music for Broadway shows, leaving a significant creative legacy in jazz.

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Ain't Misbehavin', composed in 1929 by Waller in collaboration with composer Harry Brooks and lyricist Andy Razaf, was first performed in the Broadway revue Connie's Hot Chocolates, where Louis Armstrong performed it. The production propelled the song to popularity, spreading it from Harlem throughout America and making it one of the most beloved jazz pieces of the late 1920s. Waller began performing Ain't Misbehavin' as an instrumental shortly after its debut, recording a solo piano version in 1929 that showcased his virtuoso technique and distinctive stride style. Contemporary accounts note Waller's exceptional sense of humor, as he often added improvisational commentary during performances, entertaining audiences with jokes and unexpected musical passages. Numerous subsequent versions only reinforced the composition's status as a jazz masterpiece, and Waller's rendition is still considered a benchmark of technical virtuosity, charisma, and humor.

Honeysuckle Rose, co-written by Waller and lyricist Andy Razaf and first performed in 1929, is one of Waller's most recognizable works. It premiered in the revue Load of Coal at Connie's Inn in Harlem, where Waller and other musicians experimented with new rhythms and stage techniques. By the end of the year, the piece had entered the repertoires of several prominent orchestras and rapidly spread among jazz enthusiasts. Waller repeatedly performed and recorded the composition, adding elements of humor and spontaneous improvisation. His recognizable stride style, featuring a firm, moving left-hand bass and virtuosic syncopated right-hand figures, gave the song its distinctive energy and swing. According to contemporaries, Waller often altered the lyrics during live performances to suit the mood of the evening or audience reactions, captivating listeners with spontaneity and charm. In 1999, the song was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame, highlighting its historical and cultural significance. Combining a memorable melody, lively rhythm, and clever creative touches, Honeysuckle Rose remains a "calling card" of the swing era and a testament to Fats Waller's enduring creative energy.

Joe Sullivan (1906–1971) emerged as one of the most distinctive pianists of his generation, a master of stride whose artistry combined precision, drive, and lyrical warmth. Deeply influenced by Earl Hines, Sullivan adopted a more measured rhythmic approach – preferring structural clarity and elegance over the daring temporal dislocations that defined his idol's style. Closely associated with the spirited Chicago jazz scene of the 1920s, he worked with such prominent figures as Eddie Condon and Red Nichols, accompanied Bing Crosby between 1934 and 1936, and later became a key member of Bob Crosby's orchestra – where his spirited composition Little Rock Getaway gained national recognition. In 1952, he briefly joined the touring lineup of Louis Armstrong's All-Stars, further cementing his place among the great interpreters of early jazz piano.

Art Tatum (Arthur "Art" Tatum, 1909–1956) was an American jazz pianist virtuoso and composer. Tatum became famous for his extraordinary technique, which is often associated with later jazz styles, while his playing was still largely rooted in stride piano. The starting point of Art Tatum's style was the stride of Fats Waller. However, Tatum brought his own creative and original approach to the piano, expanding left-hand harmonies in a complex and captivating way. His chord progressions were unconventional, and his technique was exceptional.

Tatum gained fame and recognition in 1933 when he performed "Tiger Rag" by composer Nick LaRocca, and his first major success came with his solo rendition of Vincent Youmans' composition "Tea for Two" (also 1933). Even in these early recordings, Tatum's unique style was evident–not only for his phenomenal speed but also for his layered, innovative harmonies, which immediately drew the attention of leading jazz musicians and critics. With the transition to swing in the 1930s, Tatum continued to develop his musical ideas and became a significant figure in the evolution of jazz performance artistry.

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It is important to remember that the musicians we call “pioneers” were truly the architects of a new musical world. They did not merely refine existing traditions; they created structures of sound, rhythm, and expression. The journey from ragtime to early jazz and then to the stride style is not simply a chronological development; it represents a revolution in technique, thinking, and creative identity. The courage and drive of the jazz pioneers to explore the new continue to inspire generations of pianists, keeping the vibrant and ever-evolving energy of early jazz alive in the bright and endlessly diverse contemporary musical world.

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