

Joe Turner: The Last of the Stride Pianists

A Personal Reminiscence

by Mark Borowsky, M.D.

*When the pianist **Joe Turner** came to New York in 1982, on one of his rare return visits to the country of his birth, I was understandably excited. He was in town for a six week engagement at the *Cookery*, a Greenwich Village restaurant run by the pioneering impresario, **Barney Josephson**, who, in the 1930s, had run a now legendary racially integrated night spot called *Café Society*.*

*Turner's last visit to New York had been in 1976, during which time his performances were lauded by the *New York Times* critic, **John S. Wilson**, as the recreation of a bygone era, which had featured the likes of **James P. Johnson**, **Thomas "Fats Waller**, **Willie "the Lion" Smith**, and **Art Tatum**. I had been a serious fan and student of stride piano since about 1979, and had recently moved to New York to begin my first year of medical school at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine.*

What follows is a brief summary of Turner's life and career, and a reminiscence of my 1982 meeting with this early Stride master.

American Jazzman Abroad

Joe Turner's story as an expatriate American jazz musician in Europe is not at all out of the ordinary. Jazz was appreciated as an art form in Europe before it was in the United States. In France, in particular, where black citizens from the French overseas empire had settled, most black Americans felt more socially accepted than they did in many parts of the United States, where they suffered from not only *de jure*, but also *de facto* racial segregation and discrimination. This was not always confined to the southern states. Among those black Americans who decided to live in Europe in the 1920's and 30's were: **Josephine Baker**, **Sidney Bechet**, **Ben Webster**, **Garnett Clark**, **Garland Wilson**, **Herman Chittison**, **Willie Lewis**, and **Joe Turner**.

Turner was born in Baltimore in 1907. By the mid 20's, he had made his way to Harlem where, as an up and coming jazz pianist, he would meet acknowledged masters of the style: **Willie "the Lion" Smith**, **Thomas "Fats" Waller**, and, the first among equals, **James Price Johnson**. By that time, Turner had learned the piano roll version (presumably **QRS**) of James P. Johnson's **Carolina Shout**. Turner's version of **Carolina Shout** was good enough for him to fall in with the New York pianists, and he found work within the musical Mecca that Harlem had become at the time.

In the 1930's, Turner moved to Paris. There he worked both as a soloist, and in the orchestra of Czech bandleader **Jan Sima**. They played in Berlin, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. **Joe Turner Stomp** and **Joe Turner Blues**, now exceedingly rare recordings, were made in Prague in 1936.

The Best of Joe Turner on Record

Turner's finest recorded work dates from the late 1930's. Two solos, **The Ladder** and **Loney**, both Turner original compositions, were recorded for **Hughes Panassie's Swing** label in 1938. **The Ladder** was most likely Turner's personal show piece (his **Carolina Shout**, if you will) which he would use to conclude a cutting contest. It's punctuated by Tatum-esque runs, and could have been imitated by few other pianists.

Loney may well have been both his best performance and his finest composition (Turner was not a prolific or a popular composer and most of what he did manage, was in the stride/cutting contest genre). **Loney** demonstrates his understanding of the blues, and further, served as a welcome and necessary contrast to the happier, up tempo stride warhorses.

Turner's two remaining solos from this period, **Liza** and **Cheek to Cheek** were done for the **Ultraphone** label in Paris in 1936. Joe's eyes lit up when I asked him about these. Not only did it obviously bring up fond memories, but indicated to him that I had a reasonably expansive knowledge of his career. He may have also been tacitly acknowledging that he too regarded these solos as his best efforts on disc, from his best professional and artistic years. **Liza** is again indebted to Tatum, infused with his trademark *glissandi*, whereas **Cheek to Cheek** seems to a bit more of a personal interpretation, and my favorite of the four solos from this period.

There you have it! Turner, at least on record, was never better than he sounded in the late thirties. For a brief two year period then, the documentary evidence indicates that his best efforts were on par with those of the finest stride pianists of the era. With the outbreak of the war in Europe Joe returned to the United States, only to once again travel to Europe in 1948, where he would settle permanently. He lived first in Zurich, then outside of Paris where he would remain until his death in 1990.

Zurich and Paris

Joe's recordings for **Swiss Columbia**, done in the early 50's, are now available on CD from the **Jazz Connoisseur** label. They are very respectable, but contain none of the vitality or originality that Joe had demonstrated in the 30's. Another solo session, recorded live at the **Café Africana** in Zurich, from 1962, was issued first on LP, then in an expanded version on CD by the English producer **Doug Dobell**, on his **77** label (His London record shop was at 77 Charing Cross Road). This was among the first Turner records that I ever owned, and by the time that I met Joe in New York in 1982, I had completely internalized its contents.

What followed then, when Joe played his sets at the **Cookery**, should be placed into this context. **The solos that he performed live in 1982, were note for note recreations of the solos that he had put onto record 20 years previously.** Exactly the same, save for the fact that Joe was now 75, instead of 55, with a corresponding diminution of technique. It is likely that he rarely bothered to practice. What for? In Paris at the **Club Los Calvados** he played the graveyard shift, *mostly* for customers who had no real interest in him or knowledge of the music. He often alternated with a mariachi trio. It also seemed that he had other, more pressing interests. Joe was said to be a very good cook.

But Turner was also overly interested in games of chance (cards and horses, I have been told). Several independent sources have confirmed the story that Joe had sustained significant gambling debts to some less than reputable Parisian elements. Because he was unable to cover these obligations, he became a virtual indentured servant at this establishment. (Which I am inferring must have been a front for the “businessmen” involved).

So, playing the piano had become mostly a way to pay the bills. With no other accomplished pianists against whom to compete, or any significant number of knowledgeable fans who would come to hear him on a regular basis, Joe had lost that necessary motivation to remain on the cutting edge of his craft, or to even maintain his once formidable skills.

A Personal Encounter With Joe Turner

One other musical observation is in order at this point. I mentioned previously that the program Joe played at the **Cookery** in 1982, was identical to what he had played on record 20 years earlier. The contemporary stride pianist **Dick Wellstood** once noted, in a very well done set of liner notes for the reclusive stride pianist, **Donald Lambert**, that the stride pianists were for the most part not great improvisers. Rather, they would work up a particular (albeit often very complicated and dramatic) arrangement of a tune, and then play this version repeatedly with very little or no variation.

James P. Johnson and **Fats Waller** were the exceptions to this rule. Their performances demonstrated a wonderful ability for improvisation. This is among the reasons that James P. and Fats continue to be regarded with such reverence. I must admit that I had not really understood Wellstood’s point, until having experienced it directly in the person of Joe Turner.

Lastly, I had mentioned to Joe that it seemed to me from what I had managed to read about him that he had lead a fairly interesting life. I was curious to know if he had any intention of writing his memoirs. I was particularly interested in his reasons (beyond the obvious ones) for living as an expatriate for most of his adult life. His response to me was that he had already told his life story to a friend in Switzerland. I asked Joe if this person might be **Johnny Simmen** (a noted Swiss jazz critic). Joe’s answer was yes. At this point then, I realized instantly that the story in question was what had previously been included in the liner notes of the 77 LP, under the title of “**The Pianists in My Life**,” essentially a reprint of an interview that he had given in 1952.

So there it was. I had already read his memoirs and heard his best recordings. The sad yet inescapable conclusion was that I had experienced pretty much everything of musical or historical interest that Joe then had to offer. With little to talk about, and having heard far better versions of his playing on record, I never again went back to the Cookery to hear him. In contrast, I probably visited Dick Wellstood about 20 – 25 times in a five year period in between 1981 and 1986 when he was the house pianist at Hanratty’s.

Nonetheless, Joe Turner’s European recordings of 1936 and 1938 remain a tantalizing indication of what might have been. During a short window in time he reached the pinnacle of his craft.

I hope this brief account adds some illumination to the story and career of this talented yet enigmatic figure in the history of jazz piano, the last of the original Harlem stride pianists.

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