Lecture 6
Early Jazz Piano

Harlem Stride
- Between 1900 and 1920, a new style of piano playing was emerging in the neighborhood of Harlem in New York City
- A later East Coast development of ragtime
- Once called “shout” piano
- Named for its loping left-hand technique found in ragtime
- Improvisation and flashy embellishments in the right hand
- Fast, energetic, and technically challenging
- Incorporated both swing rhythm and blues elements

James P. Johnson (1894 – 1955)
- Born February 1, 1894 in New Brunswick, New Jersey
- The elder statesman and “Father of Stride”
- Johnson was a fine composer as well
- His tune The Charleston was the accompaniment for the first great dance craze of the 1920s
- Johnson permanently retired from performing after a severe stroke in 1951
- He died in 1955 in Jamaica, New York

Johnson’s Influence
- Johnson influenced countless musicians including:
  - Fats Waller
  - George Gershwin
  - Count Basie
  - Duke Ellington
  - Art Tatum
  - Thelonious Monk
  - Chet Atkins

The Mule Walk
- Composed and performed by James P. Johnson
- Recorded June 14, 1939
- First issue on Columbia CL-1780

Willie “The Lion” Smith (1897 – 1973)
- Born William Henry Joseph Bonaparte Bertholoff on November 23, 1893 in Goshen, New York
- Smith served in World War I, where he saw action in France, and played drum with the African-American regimental band
- Legend has it that his nickname “The Lion” came from his reported bravery while serving as a heavy artillery gunner

Formative Years
Smith grew up on the mean streets of Newark’s red-light district, the Coast, one of the major African-American entertainment centers in the early 1900s. It was the heyday of ragtime, but his church-going mother tried to steer her son to holy music. “I used to hear my mother play a hymn,” recalls Smith, “and I used to take it and play it in ragtime.”

**Career**
- He returned to working in New York City after the war, where he worked for decades, often as a soloist.
- He sometimes worked in bands and accompanying blues singers such as Mamie Smith.
- Although working in relative obscurity, he was a “musician’s musician,” influencing countless others including Duke Ellington, George Gershwin, and Artie Shaw.
- In the 1940s his music found appreciation with a wider audience, and he toured North America and Europe through to 1971.

**Cutting Contests**
- According to Duke Ellington, the friendly rivalry between Johnson and Smith was always a sporting event.
- The pair typically battled to a draw; it was never to the blood, and neither cut the other.
- They were above that; they had too much respect for each other.

**Echoes of Spring**
- Recorded November 8, 1957.
- While Smith could stride with the best, he rarely employed a stride bass line in his own compositions.
- Echoes of Spring does not stride.
- Some of its roots are planted in the tradition of late nineteenth century genteel “parlor” piano music.

**Thomas Wright “Fats” Waller (1904 – 1943)**
- Born May 21, 1904 in New York City.
- Pianist, organist, singer, composer, & comedian.
- The most commercially successful of the stride performers.

**Lineage**
- Waller was James P. Johnson’s prize pupil.
- In turn, Waller gave lessons to a young Count Basie.
- Willie “The Lion” Smith gave Waller the nickname “Filthy” one day after a 16-year old Waller walked into Harlem’s sharpest club dressed in clothes that were not up to the club’s snappy standards.

**The Composer**
- Many of Waller’s compositions have become jazz standards.
  - *Ain’t Misbehavin’*
  - *Honeysuckle Rose*
  - *Jitterbug Waltz*
  - *Keepin’ Out of Mischief Now*
Waller & Capone

- Fats Waller was in Chicago in 1926 and, upon leaving the building where he was performing, Waller was kidnapped by four men, who bundled him into a car and drove off.
- The car later pulled up outside the Hawthorne Inn, owned by infamous gangster Al Capone.
- Fats was ordered inside the building, to find a party in full swing.
- With a gun against his back, Waller was pushed towards a piano, whereupon the gangsters demanded he start playing.
- A terrified Waller suddenly realized he was the “surprise guest” at Al Capone's birthday party.
- Soon comforted by the fact that he would not die, Waller played, according to rumor, for three days.
- When he left the Hawthorne Inn, he was very drunk, extremely tired, and had earned thousands of dollars in cash given to him by Capone himself and by party-goers as tips.

Early Death

- His weight and drinking are believed to have contributed to his death.
- On December 15, 1943, at age 39, Waller died of pneumonia aboard an eastbound train in the vicinity of Kansas City, Missouri, following a west coast engagement.

Honeysuckle Rose

- Recorded March 11, 1935.
- After Ain’t Misbehavin’, Honeysuckle Rose is probably Waller’s most famous and most recorded piece.
- Like the blues and Gershwin’s I Got Rhythm, the chord structure of Honeysuckle Rose has served as the basis for many original jazz melodies and improvisations over the years.

Art Tatum (1909 – 1956)

- Born October 13, 1909 in Toledo, Ohio.
- The greatest of all the stride pianists.
- Some jazz musicians liked to call him the eighth wonder of the world.
- From infancy he suffered from cataracts of disputed cause, which left him blind in one eye, and with only very limited vision in the other.
- Some surgery improved Tatum’s eye condition to a degree, but this effort was reversed when he was assaulted in 1930 at age 20.

Early Years

- A child prodigy, Tatum learned to play by copying piano roll recordings his mother owned, playing by ear by the age of three.
- Tatum would learn both parts of a piece for four hands by feeling the keys depressed on the piano.
- By the age of six he was able to play songs originally performed as duets, unaware that there were supposed to be two players.
- In this way, he developed an incredibly fast playing style, without losing any of his accuracy.
Importance
• Tatum’s meteoric rise to the top began with his victorious appearance at a Harlem cutting contest that included James P. Johnson, Willie “The Lion” Smith, and Fats Waller
• Tatum made a quantum leap in terms of technique and theory, and honed a new style that would greatly influence later jazz pianists
• Tatum introduced a strong, swinging pulse to jazz piano, as well as other new sounds in his improvisation and self-accompaniment
• Tatum rarely abandoned the original melodic lines of the songs he played, preferring instead to feature innovative reharmonization
• Many of Tatum's harmonic concepts and larger chord voicings were well ahead of their time in the 1930s and they would be explored by bebop-era musicians 20 years later

Coda
• Tatum recorded commercially from 1932 until near his death
• When Tatum walked into a club where Fats Waller was playing, Waller stepped away from the piano bench to make way for Tatum, announcing, “I only play the piano, but tonight God is in the house”
• Charlie Parker briefly worked as a dishwasher in a Manhattan restaurant where Tatum happened to be performing, just to listen to the legendary pianist
• Art Tatum died in Los Angeles, California from the complications of uremia (as a result of kidney failure), having been a heavy drinker since his teen years

Have You Met Miss Jones?
• Recorded December 29, 1953 in Los Angeles
• Tatum continually reworks it, never straying far from the melody but continually reharmonizing it

Boogie-Woogie
• Before stride appeared in Harlem, another style of piano playing had developed in Texas
• Rather than evolving out of ragtime or European traditions, this style was deeply rooted in the blues
• Originally called “Texas piano,” it eventually came to be known as boogie-woogie
• Boogie-woogie’s central feature is the repeating left-hand pattern of eighth notes to the bar that imitates the guitar riffs of country blues
• The right hand plays a combination of improvised blues riffs and block chords, often playing two adjacent notes to imitate the bending of notes on the guitar

Clarence “Pinetop” Smith (1904 – 1929)
• Born on June 11, 1904 in Troy, Alabama
• The “Father of Boogie-Woogie”
• He received his nickname as a child from his liking for climbing trees
• No photographs of Smith are known to exist

Career
• Pinetop toured on the Vaudeville circuit, performing as a singer, comedian, and pianist
• For a time he worked as accompanist for blues singer Ma Rainey
• He was recommended to J. Mayo Williams at Vocalion Records, and in 1928 he moved, with his wife and young son, to Chicago to record

**Pinetop’s Boogie Woogie**
- Recorded on December 29, 1928
- One of the first “boogie-woogie” style recordings to make a hit, and which cemented the name for the style
- Pinetop talks over the recording, telling how to dance to the number
- Pinetop was the first ever to direct “the girl with the red dress on” to “not move a peg” until told to “shake that thing” and “mess around”

**Pinetop’s End**
- Pinetop Smith was scheduled to make another recording session for Vocalion in 1929
- He died from a gunshot wound in a dance-hall fight in Chicago the day before the session
- Sources differ as to whether he was the intended recipient of the bullet
- “I saw Pinetop spit blood” was the famous headline in *Down Beat* magazine

**Meade Lux Lewis (1905 – 1964)**
- Born in Chicago, Illinois in September of 1905
- One of the leading boogie-woogie pianists of the day
- His performance at John Hammond’s historic *From Spirituals to Swing* concert at Carnegie Hall in 1938 brought Lewis lasting fame

**Lewis & His Contemporaries**
- Lewis and two other performers from the Hammond concert, Albert Ammons and Pete Johnson often appeared as a trio
- They performed an extended engagement at Café Society and toured as a trio
- They inspired the formation of Blue Note Records in 1939
- Their success led to a decade-long boogie-woogie craze

**Legacy**
- His solo performances had the power and intricacy of a sophisticated orchestral arrangement
- Lewis continued recording until 1962
- He died in an automobile accident in Minneapolis, Minnesota on June 7, 1964
- His best known work, *Honky Tonk Train Blues* has been recorded in various contexts, often in a big band arrangement

**Honky Tonk Train Blues**
- Recorded in Chicago in December of 1927
- Was not released until 1929
- It is a startling and vivid evocation of a train in motion
- Much of its original meaning has to do with the significance of trains and travel to African-Americans from the South in the 1920s and 1930s

**Pete Johnson (1904 – 1967)**
• Born March 25, 1904 in Kansas City, Missouri
• Began his career as a drummer
• From 1926 to 1938 he worked as a pianist, often accompanying Big Joe Turner
• In 1938 he and Turner appeared in John Hammond’s *From Spirituals to Swing* concert at Carnegie Hall
• This concert started a boogie-woogie craze
• While Johnson was one of the leading boogie-woogie pianists of the day, he also had considerable command of stride piano
• A stroke in 1958 left him partly paralyzed
• Johnson made one final appearance at John Hammond’s January 1967 *From Spirituals to Swing* concert, playing the right hand on a version of *Roll 'Em Pete* two months before his death

**Roll ‘em Pete**
• Recorded April 16, 1939
• The song was an up-tempo boogie-woogie which had become Johnson’s signature tune in the clubs
• Johnson’s recording of *Roll 'em Pete* with vocalist Big Joe Turner is regarded as one of the most important precursors of what later became known as “rock and roll”

**Earl Kenneth “Fatha” Hines (1903 – 1983)**
• Born on December 28, 1903 in the Pittsburgh suburb of Duquesne, Pennsylvania
• One of the most important pianists in jazz history
• He took classical piano lessons but also developed an ear for popular show tunes and was able to remember and play songs he heard in theaters

**Earl “Fatha” Hines and “Trumpet Style”**
• Avoided the heavy handedness of stride
• Replaced the plodding “boom-chuck” left hand with a more syncopated and rhythmically free approach
• Additionally played brilliant right-hand runs in octaves that the critics compared to Armstrong’s trumpet playing

**Hines & Satchmo**
• Developed a competitive friendship with Louis Armstrong that brought out the best in each other’s playing
• Armstrong and Hines then recorded what are often regarded as some of the most important jazz records ever made, most famously their 1928 trumpet and piano duet *Weatherbird*
• “The results seem like eavesdropping on great men speaking almost quietly among themselves”

**I Ain’t Got Nobody**
• Recorded December 12, 1928 in Chicago
• Displays another aspect of Hines’ style, that of his super-imposed double-time flights

**Chicago Years**
• For over 10 years his was “The Band” in Al Capone's Grand Terrace Café—Hines was Capone's “Mr. Piano Man”
• From the Grand Terrace, The Earl Hines Orchestra (or “Organization” as he more happily referred to it) broadcast sometimes seven nights a week and over many years, coast to coast across America
• Hines's band became the most broadcast band in America

1940s & 1950s
• Led his big band until 1947
• Rejoined Armstrong with “The All Stars” from 1949 – 1951
• Tourd the United States and Europe with his combos throughout the 1950s
• In the early 1960s, he relocated to Oakland, California and came close to retiring

Comeback Player of the Year
• In 1964, Hines’ friend Stanley Dance convinced him to give a series of recitals in New York
• Hines had never before given a recital
• The recitals caused a sensation
• Hines won the 1966 “International Critics Poll” for Down Beat Magazine’s “Hall of Fame”
• Down Beat also elected him the world's “No. 1 Jazz Pianist” in 1966
• Soon he was on Johnny Carson’s and Mike Douglas’ TV shows

Later Years
• Between his 1964 “come-back” and up to his death in 1983, Hines recorded endlessly both solo and with jazz notables
• During those years, Hines recorded approximately 90 LPs all over the world
• Within the industry he became famous for going into a studio and coming out an hour-and-a-half later with a completed ‘solo’ LP behind him including discussion and coffee time (and ideally a brandy or two)
• Retakes were almost unheard of except when Hines wanted to try a tune again in some, often completely, “other way”

Chimes in Blues
• Recorded in January of 1970
• From the album The Quintessential Earl Hines
• Here, at the behest of pianist Marian McPartland, Hines revisited 8 selections from his first QRS recording date

Sources
• History and Tradition of Jazz by Thomas E. Larson
• Jazz for Dummies by Dirk Sutro
• Jazz a film by Ken Burns
• http://en.wikipedia.org
• Jazz Piano: A Smithsonian Collection
Discography

1. “Body and Soul” by Art Tatum
   from the album The Art Tatum Solo Masterpieceess, Volume 1
   Pablo Records PACD2405-432-2

   from the album Jazz Piano: A Smithsonian Collection, Volume 1
   CBS Special Products RD 039

3. “Echoes of Spring” by Willie “The Lion” Smith
   from the album Jazz Piano: A Smithsonian Collection, Volume 1
   CBS Special Products RD 039

4. “Honeysuckle Rose” by Fats Waller
   from the album Jazz Piano: A Smithsonian Collection, Volume 1
   CBS Special Products RD 039

5. “Have You Met Miss Jones?” by Art Tatum
   from the album Jazz Piano: A Smithsonian Collection, Volume 2
   CBS Special Products RD 039

6. “Pinetop’s Boogie Woogie” by Clarence “Pinetop” Smith
   from the album The Best of Boogie Woogie
   EPM

7. “Honky Tonk Train Blues” by Meade Lux Lewis
   from the album Jazz Piano: A Smithsonian Collection, Volume 1
   CBS Special Products RD 039

8. “Climbin’ and Screamin’ (Roll ‘em Pete)” by Pete Johnson
   from the album Jazz Piano: A Smithsonian Collection, Volume 1
   CBS Special Products RD 039

9. “I Ain’t Got Nobody” by Earl “Fatha” Hines
   from the album Jazz Piano: A Smithsonian Collection, Volume 1
   CBS Special Products RD 039

10. “Chimes in Blues” by Earl “Fatha” Hines
    from the album Jazz Piano: A Smithsonian Collection, Volume 1
    CBS Special Products RD 039

11. “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” by Teddy Wilson
    from the album Jazz Piano: A Smithsonian Collection, Volume 1
    CBS Special Products RD 039

12. “Willow Weep for Me” by Art Tatum
    from the album The Art Tatum Solo Masterpieceess, Volume 1
    Pablo Records PACD2405-432-2