
LINCOLN CENTER PRESENTS

LEGACIES OF SAN JUAN HILL FESTIVAL THE MUSIC OF JAMES P. JOHNSON

AARON DIEHL

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 25 AT 7:30PM

Aaron Diehl Pianist

Ekep Nkwelle Vocalist

ALICE TULLY HALL

Musical Program

Order of selections to be announced from the stage

James P. Johnson (1894–1955)

Daintiness Rag (1916)

Caprice Rag (1917)

Steeplechase Rag (1917)

Eccentricity (1918)

Carolina Shout (1921)

Toddlin' (1923)

Worried and Lonesome Blues (1923)

If I Could Be with You (One Hour Tonight) (1926)

Jingles (1926)

Adagio from Concerto Jazz-a-Mine (1934)

The Dream (1938)

Eubie Blake (1887–1983)

I'm Craving for That Kind of Love (1921)

Love Will Find a Way (1921)

Willie "The Lion" Smith (1897–1973)

Morning Air (1938)

JAMES P. JOHNSON IN THE JUNGLES

By Matthew Guerrieri

In 1908, James P. Johnson and his family moved from Jersey City to 152 West 62nd Street, in Manhattan's San Juan Hill neighborhood, joining the thousands of Black migrants that had settled in the area since the turn of the century. Johnson was fourteen years old. The press was already calling it San Juan Hill. Whether it was because of the local preponderance of Black veterans of the Spanish-American War—and its famous Battle of San Juan Hill—or because of the area's violent clashes between Black newcomers and their white immigrant neighbors, nobody could say. Black residents had their own name for the place: the Jungles. "It was the toughest part of New York," Johnson remembered. But it was also a teeming cauldron of musical possibility, with residents eager for novelty and musicians in furious competition to innovate. Johnson, already envisaging a career in music, considered his new apartment a definite step up. For one thing, there was room for a piano.

Born in New Brunswick in 1894, Johnson first learned piano from his mother. But they sold the piano upon moving to Jersey City. There, Johnson's older brother frequented saloons; Johnson tagged along, listening at the door to the piano players, the "ticklers." Johnson was beguiled. "They had lots of girl friends, led a sporting life and were invited everywhere there was a piano. I thought it was a fine way to live."

But Johnson also picked up music at home, from his neighbors, southern Black migrants who came north as part of the Great Migration. "I'd wake up as a child and hear an old-fashioned ring-shout going on," Johnson remembered. The dancing "would go on all night and I would fall asleep sitting at the top of the stairs". The experience would bear musical fruit in the Jungles.

"I never heard real ragtime until we came to New York," Johnson said. A friend tutored Johnson through Scott Joplin's rags, the foundation on which other locals were already building. In the crucible of the Jungles, ragtime's lilt became something galvanic.

Johnson also encountered European classicism. He played piano at school, sang in choirs, even sampled the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall. Such concerts were at a remove from San Juan Hill, geographically and culturally. But they left their mark. "The people in New York were used to hearing good piano played," Johnson said. "The ragtime player had to live up to that standard. They had to get orchestral effects, sound harmonies, chords and all the techniques of European concert pianists who were playing their music all over the city."

In 1911, Johnson moved uptown. His first professional jobs were in Far Rockaway, Jersey City, the Tenderloin. It's as if he was circling his way back to the center of his ambitions: the Jungles. Soon, he was working—and again, living—in San Juan Hill.

The hottest place in San Juan Hill was in a basement. Its official name was Drake's Dancing Class—the “class” was a façade—but everybody called it the Jungles Casino. It was dank and rundown and frequented by the same Black migrants, from Georgia and the Carolinas, that Johnson knew from Jersey City. Johnson:

“They were country people and they felt homesick. When they got tired of two-steps and schottisches..., they'd yell: “Let's go back home!” ... Breakdown music was the best for such sets, the more solid and groovy the better. They'd dance, hollering and screaming until they were cooked.”

Traditional ragtime wasn't powerful enough for such abandon, so the pianists beefed up their sound. Ragtime's decorative syncopation was amplified into a generating force, fueling the all-night ritual.

All the while, Johnson honed his technique, studying classical repertoire with Bruto Giannini, an Italian-born maestro, working through Bach and Beethoven, Chopin and Liszt. You can start to hear the synthesis in Johnson's earliest compositions. “Daintiness Rag” adopts a Joplin-esque structure and affect, but the bass restlessly prowls before breaking into showy, rolling tenths, while the right hand glitters with a blur of chromatic decoration. “Caprice Rag” is even more athletic, and audacious: left-hand octaves pull the dance forward with insistent momentum, only to slam into a series of near-Wagnerian chords that take the music from F-major to a distant and dazzling D-flat for a final flourish.

It all comes together in Johnson's most celebrated composition. “Carolina Shout,” the standard exam for New York pianists throughout the 1920s, is, fundamentally, its title: a ring-shout, as danced by the Carolina migrants at the Jungles Casino. But the music's compositional intricacy is formidable, while its technical demands echo the most athletic Romantic virtuosos. The music of the Jungles was a collision of styles and ideas, particular to the place and time. The ticklers' embrace of ragtime; the exhilaration of the Black migrants' hometown dances; the brilliance of classical music—Johnson was combining it all into something new.

Even as Harlem supplanted San Juan Hill as Manhattan's main Black neighborhood, Johnson continued to mine the Jungles' stylized variation of southern folklore. “The Charleston,” Johnson's greatest hit as a theatrical songwriter, reworked themes he had invented for those dancers at the Casino. Broadway was only a few blocks from San Juan Hill, but it provided Johnson with

a formidable launch pad. As the breakout hit of *Runnin' Wild*, which ran for 220 performances on Broadway before a successful national tour, "The Charleston" circled the globe, becoming the unofficial anthem of the Roaring '20s.

In the Jungles, Johnson was a contender; in Harlem, he reigned. In clubs, at rent parties, wherever two or more pianists gathered in the name of showing off, Johnson trounced all comers. Even now, "Jingles," for instance, an encyclopedic riot of high-level Harlem sleight-of-hand, delivers a potent dose of Johnson's cutting-contest prowess. There's still a connection to Johnson's earlier rags, but everything is bigger, faster, more flamboyant. The center of gravity has shifted from the dance floor to the keyboard.

Johnson put "Jingles" on record in 1930. By that point, his aspirations had grown to include classical composition. His most well-known effort in that vein, the piano rhapsody *Yamekraw*, was premiered at Carnegie Hall in 1927. It was named for a Black settlement on the outskirts of Savannah; once again, Johnson was evoking places and traditions that crucially informed the soundtrack of the Jungles.

Yet, for all its energy, San Juan Hill was a center of Black life in New York for only a decade or two. Harlem had the renaissance. Harlem gave its name to the dazzling piano style Johnson pioneered: Harlem stride. Stride begat swing, swing begat bebop—by mid-century, jazz was a distinct music, garnering critical analysis and intellectual attention. But its beating heart was the principles Johnson distilled out of the welter of the Jungles: northern swagger, southern strut, classical splendor. A century later, the sound of jazz is still, on some level, the sound of San Juan Hill.

Matthew Guerrieri is a musician and writer whose work explores a wide range of music—classical, jazz, pop, avant-garde and early music, opera, and music for dance—in search of surprising connections not just between disparate genres of music, but also between music and currents of thought in history, politics, philosophy, and science. He is the author of The First Four Notes: Beethoven's Fifth and the Human Imagination (Knopf, 2012).

This program note is abridged from the essay "James P. Johnson in the Jungles" by Matthew Guerrieri, which is published on the Legacies of San Juan Hill digital hub at LincolnCenter.org/SanJuanHill.

*The recollections cited by James P. Johnson in this essay are drawn from his 1959 interviews with Tom Davin for the Jazz Review.**

*Tom Davin, "Conversations with James P. Johnson [Parts I and II]." *The Jazz Review*, vol. 2, nos. 5 and 6 (June and July 1959).

MEET THE ARTISTS

AARON DIEHL

Multifaceted pianist and composer Aaron Diehl is one of the great contemporary instrumental musicians of his era. Though his primary metier is jazz, Diehl's creative output transcends genre with a sound that *The New York Times* calls "elegant... upholding a traditional framework while crisply demolishing usual notions of conservatism." Diehl is both a bandleader and soloist, in addition to his tremendous work in supporting and collaborating with many major artists and ensembles, including Wycliffe Gordon, the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, and Cécile McLorin Salvant.

A leader in contemporary jazz with an expansive, orchestral, lyrical approach to the piano, Diehl has headlined the Monterey, Detroit, and Newport Jazz Festivals, and had residencies at Jazz at Lincoln Center, the Village Vanguard, SF Jazz, and many more. Diehl's creative vision draws equally from the classical music tradition, and he has performed with top orchestras across the US, at leading venues like Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, The Hollywood Bowl, the Elbphilharmonie, and Tanglewood.

EKEP NKWELLE

Ekep Nkwelle is a force in today's jazz scene, with a journey from Washington, DC to New York City. She refined her talents at Duke Ellington School of the Arts, Howard University, and The Juilliard School. Her captivating voice has earned her collaborations with jazz legends Wynton Marsalis, Dianne Reeves, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Cyrus Chestnut, and the late Russell Malone. She has also performed on renowned stages including SFJAZZ, NPR's Tiny Desk Concert, Marians Jazzroom, and the Umbria Jazz Festival.

In 2023, she received the Juilliard Career Advancement Grant, nominated by Marsalis, highlighting her artistry. Beyond performing, Ekep supports influential arts organizations including The National Jazz Museum in Harlem and Jazz Houston, and she is one of Jazz at Lincoln Center's latest rising stars.

LEGACIES OF SAN JUAN HILL

San Juan Hill, and the broader Lincoln Square neighborhood of which it was a part, was a culturally diverse, densely populated, and largely working-class community. Many iconic and influential figures lived there over the years, and their contributions to scholarship, music and art, journalism, social work, and other fields still resonate today. Jazz legends including James P. Johnson, Benny Carter, and Thelonious Monk performed and honed their respective stride piano, swing, and bebop styles. Vaudeville acts, dramatic plays, and musicals enlivened stages. Residents danced “The Charleston,” and the musical *Runnin’ Wild* catapulted the popular dance style to international fame. Mambo and other Afro-Caribbean forms were a staple of the area. All this and more grew out of the vibrant theaters, clubs, and dancehalls that lined San Juan Hill and historic Lincoln Square.

In the 1950s, the area was targeted for “urban renewal”. The Lincoln Square Development Plan, one of many such programs implemented across the country at the time, displaced more than 7,000 families and 800 businesses, demolished hundreds of buildings, and replaced them with a series of superblocks, including Fordham University, Lincoln Towers, and Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.

The Legacies of San Juan Hill initiative was created to uplift the complex history, communities, and cultural legacy of this area through artistic programming, commissions, discussions, scholarship, and education.

The Legacies of San Juan Hill Festival is a multi-day festival celebrating the artistic legacy of this historic New York City neighborhood. Through live performance, film, interactive workshops, and talks, the festival uplifts the music, theater, and dance that thrived in San Juan Hill, shines a light on the artists who created there, and explores the ongoing cultural impact of their work. The festival offers audiences an experience of the artistry that transformed the area in the first half of the 20th century and continues to influence artistic work being made today—connecting the past to the future in a joyous celebration.

LEGACIES OF SAN JUAN HILL FESTIVAL

OCTOBER 14–29, 2025

San Juan Hill: Manhattan's Lost Neighborhood

A film by Stanley Nelson

Tuesday, October 14

Francesca Beale Theater, Film at Lincoln Center

San Juan Hill: Manhattan's Lost Neighborhood

A film by Stanley Nelson

Saturday, October 18

Relaxed virtual screening

San Juan Hill: A New York Story

By Etienne Charles

Featuring University of Miami Frost Symphony Orchestra

under the direction of Maestro Gerard Schwarz

Thursday, October 23

Alice Tully Hall

Dennis Hernández y su Conjunto Amalia

Part of ¡VAYA!

Friday, October 24

David Rubenstein Atrium

The Music of James P. Johnson

By Aaron Diehl

Saturday, October 25

Alice Tully Hall

Who Is Thelonious Monk?

Presented by Jazz at Lincoln Center

Part of Lincoln Center's Open House

Sunday, October 26

Wu Tsai Theater, David Geffen Hall

A Nuyorican Tale

By Carlos Henriquez Nonet

Tuesday, October 28–Wednesday, October 29

Dizzy's Club, Jazz at Lincoln Center

Learn more about the history of San Juan Hill at [LincolnCenter.org/SanJuanHill](https://lincolncenter.org/SanJuanHill).

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