



KANSAS LEGEND BIOGRAPHY

Big Joe Turner (1911-1985) and Pete Johnson (1904-1967)

From blues to boogie-woogie to rock and roll, Big Joe Turner and Pete Johnson impacted more than a half-century of music. The pair collaborated off and on throughout their careers, and each worked with numerous other notable musicians along the way.

Both Turner and Johnson were born in Kansas City, Mo., seven years apart. Big Joe began shouting the blues even as a teen, as his stocky and solid frame allowed him into the clubs underage. Turner took a job as a bartender in a nightclub and would sing whenever the music moved him, regardless of whether or not he was in front of a microphone. In the early 1930s, Turner met Pete Johnson, and their lives would never be the same.

Pete Johnson had begun his musical career playing the drums in Kansas City clubs in 1922. After about four years, Johnson switched instruments and began playing blues and jazz music on the piano. His style developed into boogie-woogie, and upon meeting Big Joe, that particular genre of music would take off.

The two men began playing and recording, and traveled to New York together in 1936. In 1938, Turner and Johnson performed the famous From Spirituals to Swing concert at Carnegie Hall, showcasing all types of music including Negro spirituals, jazz, blues, swing and boogie-woogie. Other performers at the show included Count Basie, Albert Ammons, Sonny Terry and the Golden Gate Quartet, but Pete and Big Joe's tunes such as "Low Down Dog" and "It's All Right Baby" launched America's boogie-woogie craze.

The end of the year brought Johnson and Turner to the recording studio for the legendary piece "Roll 'Em Pete," a thrilling duet that would remain popular for decades. The two collaborated with "Hot Lips" Page the following year and other legendary musicians. In 1941, Johnson appeared with Albert Ammons and Lena Horne in the short film "Boogie Woogie Dream."

Turner headed out to the West Coast during the war years without Johnson, during which time he signed with National Records and recorded his rhythm and blues hit "My Gal's a Jockey." Turner continued to record for a variety of Indie labels throughout the 1940s until he spent a short amount of time as frontman for Count Basie's band.

Big Joe would go on to record the popular blues ballad "Chains of Love" before recording the most famous track of his career, "Shake, Rattle and Roll" in 1954. Although Turner had become a household name with Johnson, Johnson had been continuing to record with notable artists himself, releasing albums like "Pete's House Warmin'," which featured other legendary Kansas City musicians. He toured with Jazz at the Philharmonic even after falling ill in the 1960s.

Johnson passed away in 1967 in Buffalo, N.Y. Turner continued making music and recording into the 1970s and '80s until his death in 1985. The duo would go down in history for their contributions to multiple music genres that dominated the 20th century.

