

# J. J. Johnson

*J.J. Johnson was born James Louis in Indianapolis on January 22, 1924. At the age of 9, he played piano with a church organist and became very interested in music during his second year at Attucks High School. The only school instrument available to him at the time was a baritone saxophone. J.J. played this instrument for a very short time and, at the age of fourteen, picked up the trombone, playing in the high school band as well as the brass marching band of the Y.*

*By the time he was eighteen, J.J. left home to play with Snookum Russel's band, of which Fats Navarro was a member. He went on to play with other legendary jazzers Benny Carter (from '42-5), Count Basie (from '43-4) and Illinois Jacquet (from '47-9). The earliest recordings of J.J. are with the Benny Carter Orchestra, where he functioned only as a section player. Johnson's first recorded solo, only twelve measures long, was with the group on the Capitol label on the track Love for Sale.*

*In 1944, he played at the very first concert of Jazz at the Philharmonic. J.J.'s fluid style and rapid fire technique on the trombone soon gained him notoriety. His technique on slide trombone was so clean, in fact, that the people at the time swore he was playing valve trombone. J.J. has stated that his ". . . original influences were Pres and Roy, then Diz and Bird".*

*In October of 1951, J.J. joined an all-star sextet led by bassist Oscar Pettiford for a USO tour of Korea and Southern Pacific islands. However, this group encountered internal problems that resulted in Pettiford leaving the tour early to return to the United States. In 1953, J.J. left the music business to work as a maintenance inspector for Sperry Gyroscope, performing only occasionally. On April 20th, he recorded for Blue Note with Miles Davis sextet on the titles Tempus Fugit, Ray's Idea, C.T.A., and Johnson's own compositions Keyhole and Enigma. It wasn't until the next year, 1954, that he quit his job at Sperry Gyroscope and started playing with fellow trombonist, Kai Winding. This led to the formation of the Jay & Kai group, which stayed together for the next couple years and enjoyed critical acclaim.*

*The New York Classical Jazz and Classical Music Society commissioned J.J. to compose a piece for solo trombone, piano, drums, and brass ensemble. This resulted in his piece Poem for Brass, which was recorded in October of 1956. According to Schuller, this music was "third stream", his term for music that combined the jazz and classical idioms.*

*Late 1959 saw J.J. reorganizing his sextet, keeping prior members Cedar Walton on piano, Albert Heath on drums, and Clifford Jordan on saxophone. To this, he added Freddie Hubbard on trumpet and Arthur Taylor on bass. After working steadily for nine months, the group recorded one of J.J.'s best albums, J.J. Inc. The album included seven original tunes- Shutterbug, Fatback, Aquarius, In Walked Horace, Minor Mist, Mohawk, and Turnpike (this was not issued on the original vinyl album, but was included when the album was re-released on CD in 1998).*

*J.J. disbanded the sextet in September of 1960 so he could work on his compositional skills. From this time to March 1961, he worked on a composition entitled Perceptions, written for orchestra and commissioned by Duke Ellington and arranged by John O'Leary. The work was recorded on May 22, 1961 with a large orchestra under the direction of Leonard Bernstein. Schuller had this to say about J.J.:*

*"His compositional abilities and his range of expressions . . . have expanded with each new work throughout the years. Beyond all externals of form and technique, this music combines an eloquent musical imagination with a strongly disciplined mind, producing an enjoyable music of depth, pulsating warmth and infectious spirit."*

*Johnson spent a year on the road with the Miles Davis sextet. In July of 1964, he joined the Radio City Music Hall's roster of musicians and toured Japan with a sextet including Clark Terry and Sonny Stitt. In 1965, he was commissioned by Robert A. Boudreau, Music Director of the American Wind Symphony Orchestra, Erie, Pennsylvania. The resulting piece was Diversions for Six Trombones, Celeste, Harp, and Percussion.*

*J.J. moved from New York to L.A. in 1970 to write music for movies and television. Some of his first work was a little orchestration work for The Adventurers and composing music for Barefoot in the Park. He was later assigned to write music for four popular television shows, Mayberry R.F.D., The Danny Thomas Show, The Dick Van Dyke Show, and The Mod Squad. His movie credits (either orchestrating or writing the music) include Man and Boy, The Heat, Across 110th Street, Cleopatra Jones, and Shaft. Oddly enough, J.J. was winning polls as the best jazz trombonist at this time, even though he wasn't actively playing.*

*Around the time he was recording for Antilles, he and his wife, Vivian, moved to his hometown Indianapolis, Indiana. Sadly, several years later, Vivian passed away. J.J. dedicated an album to her, simply entitled Vivian. J.J. started performing more frequently for the public. In 1988, he played the Village Vanguard in New York City where Slide Hampton made his way onstage and presented him with a scroll signed by many grateful jazz trombonists in show of their gratitude for his contribution to jazz.*

*In the June 1997 issue of Downbeat magazine, J.J. announced his retirement from live performances. A few years were spent in his hometown of Indianapolis, IN, composing works on his Macintosh Quadra 650, occasionally offering input to the J.J. Johnson Mailing List. A book also came out written by Joshua B. Johnson, Jr. and Louis Bourgois III entitled The Musical World of J.J. Johnson.*

*Tragedy struck the jazz and trombone community when on February 4, 2001, J.J. Johnson passed away. Only now are we able to see the number of lives that he has touched in a positive manner. In addition, J.J.'s legacy will continue to inspire new trombonists.*

*From:  
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