

# “Charleston”--The Golden Gate Orchestra (1925)

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Essay by Robert Rawlins (guest post)\*



*The Golden Gate Orchestra. c. 1925*

In 1923, the songwriting team of James P. Johnson (composer) and Cecil Mack (lyricist) were charged with writing the musical score to the Broadway musical “Runnin’ Wild.” Among the numbers they contributed was a song called “Charleston,” performed by Elizabeth Welch and the dancing chorus to close the first act.

Little did they know at the time that they had just written the theme song of the Roaring Twenties.

The origins of the dance step with its characteristic rhythm can be traced back to dockworkers in Charleston, South Carolina, in the early 1900s. And this was not the first time the dance was featured in a musical comedy--a tune called “The Charleston Dance” was featured in the 1922 Black musical “Liza,” with music written by Maceo Pinkard (author of “Sweet Georgia Brown”). Johnson recalled seeing the dance performed on stage as early as 1913. But “Runnin’ Wild” was the show that perfected the nuances of the dance step, tailored it for popular appeal, and introduced it to the public through Johnson’s song. It became one of the most popular hits of the 1920s and remains today the emblematic dance number of the jazz age.

For having written the song that launched one of the biggest dance crazes in history, you’d think the name James P. Johnson would be better known by the public. He certainly is revered by musicians. Jazz historians generally credit Johnson as the inventor of the “Harlem Stride,” a uniquely East Coast approach to playing the piano that requires a prodigious technique, powerful hands, and relentless stamina. Johnson, along with Willie the Lion Smith and Fats Waller, was one of the three seldom-disputed masters of the style. But along with his amazing technical abilities, Johnson also built a fine reputation as an astute and sensitive accompanist and was a favorite of both Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters. In addition to his performing career, Johnson composed several hit songs, including “Runnin’ Wild,” “If I Could Be with You (One Hour Tonight),” “Old Fashioned Love,” “A Porter’s Love Song to a Chambermaid,” and his tour-de-force for the piano, “Carolina Shout.” In 1970, Johnson was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame.

If the “Charleston” was the iconic song of the jazz age, the California Ramblers (a.k.a. the Golden Gate Orchestra) was the iconic band of the period. If they weren’t the best band of the 1920s, they were close to it, and they were undisputedly the most prolific. They made hundreds of recordings, for a variety of labels, using more than 100 pseudonyms, including such whimsical names as the Goofus Five, the Kentucky Blowers, the University Six, and the Varsity Eight. As was typical at the time, the geographic references mean nothing at all. The band members were mostly all from the Midwest and the East Coast and had never even visited some of the places used for their titles.

After a shaky beginning, the band hit its stride in 1923, when they opened at the California Ramblers Inn in Pelham, New York, firmly establishing itself as a major contender among New York City dance bands. (Because the establishment changed its name for the occasion, it’s difficult to say whether the band was named after the inn or vice versa.) The “New York Evening Standard” called the group “ten snappy chaps ... double barreled musicians in the truest and best sense of the word.”

The band was youthful, extremely talented, energetic, and hot. They were particularly sought out by college students, who saw them representing the same carefree, happy spirit that pervaded the era. Some of the most famous musicians of the period were found within their ranks, including bass saxophonist Adrian Rollini, cornetist Red Nichols, trombonist Tommy Dorsey, and reed man Jimmy Dorsey. The versatility and musicianship of the band was such that they had little trouble adopting different styles to match the various labels they recorded for, which, in part, explains the myriad of names they used.

Another unique feature of the ensemble was that they were the only prominent band that did not have an arranger. Instead, they relied on stock arrangements from publishers, which they would then alter in very creative ways according to their needs. Most likely, considering the talent of its members, this was a cooperative effort. The expected result of this absence of a band arranger would be a faceless, not readily identified overall band sound. But that was not the case. First, there were the excellent improvisational abilities of the soloists in the band. But even more distinguishing was the unmistakable sound of Adrian Rollini’s bass saxophone. A marvelous musician, and virtuoso on several instruments, Rollini had the technique and sound to provide powerful, swinging bass lines unlike anything possible on a tuba or upright bass. In short, he *was* the unique sound of the California Ramblers.

On April 2, 1925, the Ramblers assembled in the Edison Recording Studio in New York City to record two numbers, “Charleston,” and an obscure song called “Oregon Trail.” As with almost every recording of “Charleston,” the lyrics are not sung. (Audiences of the 1920s generally came to dance and were reluctant to accept a singer with an orchestra. Since the number is all about the dance, it is not surprising that Cecil Mack’s lyrics, which were serviceable at best, were routinely omitted on recordings.) The recording of this number for the Edison Company is a bit of an eyebrow raiser. Mr. Edison, who insisted on hand selecting his recording artists, was adamantly opposed to jazz music and all recent trends. But, by the middle 1920s, he had reluctantly turned over the selection to his sons, marking a dramatic change in policy.

The Edison Company at this time was recording on a type of record known as a Diamond Disc. The recording process utilized a hill-and-dale process as opposed to the laterally cut grooves used by most other companies. This resulted in a slightly higher sound quality, but that wasn't the real advantage. Most 78 RPM records could only hold just over three minutes of music. For that reason, tempos were often speeded up, verses omitted, and solos cut or truncated in order to stay within the confines of the medium. By contrast, Edison Diamond Discs could hold up to four-and-one-half minutes of music. With their fine bullpen of soloists and ready supply of ad hoc arranging techniques, the Ramblers had no trouble utilizing the extra playing time. The eight-bar introduction, stop-time breaks for bass saxophone, and ample soloing space for several instruments showcased the unique talents of the Ramblers.

The arrangement grabs the listener at the outset, with an aggressive presentation of the characteristic motive by the entire orchestra in unison. (By contrast, two other prominent recordings of the period, those by Paul Whiteman and Arthur Gibbs, fail to include the famous rhythm until nearly 30 seconds into the tune.) A fairly straight rendition of the verse follows, leading to a rather soft-spoken first chorus, played by the reeds. Clearly, the arrangement was intended to start with an attention-getter, then back off and make you wait for it. The next chorus features some deep-throated, improvised breaks by Rollini on the bass saxophone, leading to another fairly straight presentation of the verse. Piano, trombone and cornet share the soloing on the next chorus, followed by a full chorus of alto saxophone. It's curious to hear young Jimmy Dorsey with all of his technique and improvisational skills in place yet relying on an exaggerated swing feel that would very soon be out of style. Nevertheless, his lines are so artfully woven that the slightly jerky rhythmic feel is hardly noticeable. A hard-swinging final chorus, with a few "special effects" caps the song off, with the obligatory cymbal splash at the end.

As was typical in the 1920s, a hit song was seldom associated with one artist but was fair game for everyone. In 1925 alone more than 12 recordings of "Charleston" appeared. Some had very creative arrangements, and some became big hits, but none seem to capture the combination of musical artistry and high-spirited fun as did the California Ramblers.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.