

# Joe Turner

Blues Vocalist  
1911-1985

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by David Conrads

Joe Turner had a tremendous voice and a talent for improvising lyrics. He was called the “Boss of the Blues,” and during the 1930s—Kansas City’s musical heyday—“Big Joe” Turner was the greatest blues singer in town. An innovator, he made enormous contributions to both jazz and rhythm and blues. He also played a seminal (though largely unappreciated) role in the development of rock ‘n’ roll and was a major influence on such later stars as Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, and Elvis Presley.

Joe Turner was born and raised in Kansas City. In the late 1920s, he got a job as a bartender at the Sunset Club, a night spot owned by Felix Payne. It was there, while mixing drinks, that he started singing to house pianist Pete Johnson’s accompaniment. Turner’s volcanic, half-shouted blues, along with Johnson’s spectacular boogie-woogie piano, electrified club patrons and attracted the attention of such bandleaders as Bennie Moten, Andy Kirk, and Count Basie, with whom he later toured.

In 1938, Turner and Johnson appeared in the “From Spirituals to Swing” concert at Carnegie Hall. Turner’s early records include “Roll ‘Em, Pete,” “Goin’ Away Blues,” and “Cherry Red” for the Vocalion record label, and “Piney Brown Blues,” written for the manager of the Sunset Club for Decca Records.

Turner went to California in the late 1940s where he performed on the Los Angeles circuit and recorded for a variety of small, independent record companies, eventually landing a contract with Atlantic Records. He had a string of hit records for Atlantic in the 1950s, including “Shake, Rattle and Roll,” a rock ‘n’ roll classic.

Although slowed in later years by health problems, Turner continued to perform and record until shortly before his death in 1985. His album “Blues Train,” recorded with the group Room Full of Blues, won a Grammy Award in 1983.



## Sources

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