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AHS 3528

THE NEW RAGTIME GUITAR

David Laibman & Eric Schoenberg



Created & recorded by Sam Charters

M
1366
L185
N532
1971

MUSIC LP

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SIDE I

Band 1. Maple Leaf Rag	2:52
Band 2. Castle House Rag	2:43
Band 3. Stop Time Rag	3:05
Band 4. Red Carpet Rag	4:08
Band 5. Ragtime Oriole	2:42
Band 6. Wedding Of The Painted Dolls	2:50

SIDE II

Band 1. Kitten On The Keys	3:44
Band 2. At A Georgia Camp Meeting	1:42
Band 3. Temptation Rag	3:15
Band 4. Eccentricity Rag	2:36
Band 5. Dill Pickles Rag	2:47

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COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

PHOTO BY DAVID GAHR

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Notes by David Laibman

with an introduction and some documentation by
Samuel Charters

It seems like a while ago - wasn't that long - when the guitar was still being picked, instead of amplified - and all of us knew somebody who could play a little ragtime on the guitar. The idea'd come from somewhere: Reverend Gary Davis?, who played lots of it and taught so many of his students the finger bends around "Maple Leaf Rag." Or the 6 7 8s String Band? who ragged their way through traditional jazz with a mandolin, steel guitar, guitar, and bass. Or Dave Van Ronk?, who wasn't being entirely straight about it; since he was a ragtime head early - very early - and didn't have to get it from anybody. Or the Dallas String Band, with their all-state, A#1, conference champion version of Dallas Rag?, which was later taken on tour by The New Lost City Ramblers. And can't forget Mississippi John Hurt, with his "Creole Belles," and its new kind of ragtime - and Elizabeth Cotton, with so delicate touch. But perhaps more than the others The Dallas String Band and Van Ronk, whose "St. Louis Tickle" arrangement was slavishly imitated on campuses throughout the fifty states. (If there were fifty then. Can never remember about Alaska and Hawaii.) But not John Fahey, who has built - brilliantly - on blues more than rags.

With all these things hanging in the air there was a lot of finger-picked raggy guitar - Danny Kalb, Ian Buchanan, Stefan Grossman, Eric Von Schmidt, Jim Kweskin - and off somewhere, where hardly anybody heard him - only dim, cheap tapes - David Laibman. We found out finally he was out of the country, but there were still these tapes. He couldn't really do what he was trying to do - which was to play complete piano rags, with all the notes and all the sections, on the guitar - but he was trying like hell. New Laibman tape and much annoyance at the preposterousness of the idea, to play all those notes, with only two hands and ten fingers. So (As Van Ronk would say, "If I've told you once I've told you a hundred times, Orville, that thing will never fly.")

But everyone else amplified up and moved on and still the only thing we heard of Laibman was tapes--then I heard a different tape. In 1966 he began playing some of the rags with his cousin, Eric Schoenberg, who had been playing some ragtime guitar already. Rick had been arranging rags for the guitar and he added his ideas to David's ideas. When the two of them put it together they had - finally - a new kind of ragtime guitar.

At some point of ragtime's history there were guitar arrangements for the piano rags - they haven't turned up but they were advertised on some of the old sheet music - but none of them was recorded, and it's hard to tell if they were ever played. But what we finally had from David and Eric was a true classic ragtime guitar style, and as Dave's notes make clear, this is what he had in mind almost from the beginning.

Samuel Charters

Truly an unparalleled union! The guitar: a versatile instrument, whose voices come from many cultural traditions. It is really many instruments. It was part of my New York growing up: hootenannies (the real ones), Washington Square, trade union rallies, camp reunions, Pete Seeger. Ragtime: like the guitar, a mixed bag, with one root in classical piano, serious, grand; another in the traditional harmonies of country music; still another in the blues and chants of the cotton fields; staid, yet wild, with its twinkling clash between predictability in the bass, the inevitability of the form, and the devilish syncopation and near-dissonance at the top.

This record does not pretend to be a serious study of ragtime sources. Ragtime on the guitar is a further mixing of traditions, and while it is not related to the established contemporary sounds, it must be regarded as at least a contemporary chirp.

In my case, it all started with "Dallas Rag," which I first heard at a New Lost City Ramblers concert at Oberlin, 1959. This is a country cousin of the full-scale piano rags, and was recorded originally by The Dallas String Band in 1927. My guitar fingers, during my first year at Antioch College (1960), were looking for something new to do and this was it.

After "Dallas Rag," one thing just led to another. Ragtime, with its regular bass, traditional chording and syncopation seemed to lend itself to a guitar technique built up out of folk styles: blues runs, Elizabeth Cotton two-finger picking, Chet Atkins damping, etc. John Cohen's walking basses in the New Lost City Ramblers records suggested putting together bass runs and the melody line, and this idea dominated everything for a while. I even tried it out on a few of Billy Faier's banjo versions of fiddle tunes, and in those days you could hear a rag-like version of "MacPherson's Lament."

I never was able to sit down and study ragtime sources with any care, but luckily my student travels brought me into contact with new, and irregular, sources of traditional music. Working as a barman in a pub in England (the Royal Hotel, Purfleet, Essex), I met a sailor off a ship (Norwegian, I think), who left me some sheet music - clarinet parts to "Kansas City Stomp" and something else. I never knew whether I was playing the melody or not, but jolly guitar pieces they were.

A real influence was Keith Matthews, a fellow student at Ruskin College, Oxford, and crackerjack pianist. I learned "Maple Leaf Rag," "Hilarity Rag," "Grandpa's Spells" and others from his (free) piano renditions. He was deep into "Trad Jazz."

My most colorful sources for ragtime guitar pieces were unreliable guides to the originals, and I still have to rely on the Sam Charterses of this world to be sure I'm not butchering some Joplin or Scott piece beyond recognition. "Stoptime," "Temptation Rag," "Castle House Rag," were all learned from original recordings. I have a special debt to Bill Keith, the Boston-area bluegrass banjo genius, who also turned out to be a ragtime enthusiast and collector of old (many unrecorded!) player piano rolls. Bill took the time to put together a tape of choice things from his collection, my source for "Kitten on the Keys," "Red Carpet Rag," and "Wedding of the Painted Dolls" (recorded on a player nickelodeon).

Many people ask me how to transcribe a ragtime composition, created for the piano, onto the guitar. Without going into technical details, here is one major point. Face it: you can't transfer, note for note, something written for 88 keys onto six strings. The trick is to

capture the spirit, not the letter, of the piece.

I have known this for several years now, and am still trying to live up to it. It was Dave Van Ronk who brought it home to me. He listened to a batch of fingerbustler renditions. His comment: "Break the things up into parts for two guitars. It'll free you to concentrate on the style of the melody and the bass separately, and will make the whole thing playable. Sound more like music." This planted the idea that led directly to this record. Graduating, coming to New York, finding that Rick was working in his own way at ragtime guitar instrumentals, I found each step leading to the next, as we worked out the double guitar sound.

But Dave's advice is really deeper: Ragtime can be played on guitar, but you can never make a guitar do things a guitar can't do. The rags must be worked into a guitar personality, not a piano personality; otherwise the guitar is putting on airs; the medium and the message are in disharmony. This means that the construction of a rag, the bass patterns, the modulations, sometimes even the melody, must be changed to suit the needs of the guitar.

How do you do that, and still preserve the original music? Translators tell me that they have a similar problem (especially translators of poetry). I only hope we have been able to put together music whose new qualities jell, and don't jar, with the great tradition from which it comes.

David Laibman

A NOTE ON THE PIECES, TUNINGS, ETC.

A1. MAPLE LEAF RAG

Scott Joplin's great piece from 1899 - the most widely played rag of them all. David is lead - as he is on all the duets except "Dill Pickles" - and he's in D tuning (D A D G B E) with the capo on the third fret. Rick is in regular tuning, also capoed on the third fret, and the arrangement is in the key of F. The Maple Leaf was a bar and sporting club in Sedalia, Missouri, and they probably had some guitar players of their own at the time.

2. CASTLE HOUSE RAG

James Reese Europe, the black band leader from Harlem, wrote this for the dance team of Vernon and Irene Castle in 1914. He was their musical director, and his band played every afternoon at their dance "salon," The Castle House, in New York. The sheet music had their picture on the cover, cheek to cheek, dancing one of their specialties. David is in G tuning (D G D G B E), capoed on second fret, Rick is in regular tuning, no capo. The rag modulates from A to D.

3. STOPTIME RAG

A brilliant Scott Joplin rag from 1910. The tempo in the sheet music is marked "Fast or slow," and there's a note, "To get the desired effect of 'Stoptime' the pianist should stamp the heel of one foot heavily upon the floor, wherever the word 'Stamp' appears in the music." The word "stamp" is written 174 times in the music, making it the only rhythm piece ever written with scored foot tapping. David plays it solo, in regular tuning, key C to A minor.

4. RED CARPET RAG

The tape Bill Keith sent David was the source for this beautiful rag - and nothing else has turned up about it. It isn't mentioned in the one book on ragtime, "They All Played Ragtime," which is a good source for all kinds of ragtime knowledge. The duet has a sweet stateliness to it - a ragtime elegance. David is in D tuning, capoed on the fifth fret. Rick is in regular tuning, no capo. The keys are G to C.

5. THE RAGTIME ORIOLE

James Scott, 1911. With Joplin and Joseph Lamb, James Scott was one of the three most important ragtime composers. Densely textured rags, moving in close, tight patterns. David plays it as a solo, G tuning, no capo.

6. WEDDING OF THE PAINTED DOLLS

One of the many ragtime-like piano novelties that followed ragtime once the first excitement started to dwindle. This one was by two prolific song writers, Arthur Fried and Naceo Herb Brown, one of their best, and very popular. Both David and Rick are in regular tuning, capoed on the second fret. The keys go from D to F# to A#.

B1. KITTEN ON THE KEYS

ZeZ Confrey's "piano novelty" of 1921. Confrey, like Fried and Brown, was following the big ragtime craze, but he was a good ragtime pianist himself and wrote this as a display piece - something to knock over an audience with. It's just as effective on the guitar. Something like "Kitten On The Strings." Both guitars in regular tuning, both capoed on second fret. The keys are F# to D to B.

2. AT A GEORGIA CAMP MEETING

When Kerry Mills wrote it in 1897 he thought of it as a cakewalk, rather than as rag, but it's one of the best early syncopated pieces. A strong flow of melody from strain to strain. Rick's solo - in regular tuning, key is A.

3. TEMPTATION RAG

The cover of the sheet music has a Circe-like orange lady, with her hair streaming into a blue tinted ocean. The rag - the most successful piece of Henry Lodge's, from 1909 - has an oriental cast to the melody, setting up the tension of the repeated sequences of the first phrase to resolve it on the sudden ascending run in both guitars in harmony. David and Rick in regular tuning, capoed on second fret, keys B minor and D.

4. ECCENTRICITY

The clarinet player Red Cless played it with Muggsy Spanier's Ragtime Band in the 1930's - recorded it in 1939. David plays it as a solo - regular tuning, keys E to A.

5. DILL PICKLES RAG

Composed by Charles L. Johnson, published in 1906. Has become a country standard - one of the four or five instrumentals in every guitar player's fingers. Rick is the lead guitar, playing with a flat pick, the only time either David or Rick uses one. Both guitars in regular tuning, no capoes, keys C to F.

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Some Other Details.

David - 28 now, teaching at Brooklyn College, economics and social science - married to Ellie since 1967 - assistant editor of New World Review. Has played since he was 12, started in summer camp with Pete Seeger - then all the things that went on in the Village and Washington Square - 18 & 19 with a group called the Davis Street Wanderers. Sang a little. Studied a year at Oxford - economics - played in Britain, worked as barman, recorded "Orange Blossom Special" with Alex Campbell in 1963 (the album is Way Out West), and did a BBC sound track for Peggy Seeger.

Rick - 24, BA in literature from Fairleigh Dickinson, living in Edgewater, teaching guitar at Fretted Instruments in New York. Began in summer camp like his cousin David, lessons from Winnie Winston when he was 13. Sing Out has published his arrangement of "Living In The Country" and "Nobody Knows You When You're Down & Out" - Happy Traum has published his "Dill Pickles," Stefan Grossman his "Georgia Camp Meeting." Started the rags with David in 1966.

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ERRATA

TRACK
102

FOR
FW03528

READ
Castle House Rag

The LP label, insert, and back of the jacket list Track 102 as "Castle House Rag" when the correct title of the song is "Hot Chocolate Rag".