

JOSEPH LAMB: A STUDY IN CLASSIC RAGTIME

RECORDED AT HIS HOME, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK, AUGUST 12, AND AUGUST 22, 1959

RAGTIME RAGTIME
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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

COTTONTAIL RAG

EXCELSIOR RAG

CLEOPATRA RAG

A Meeting with Scott Joplin

SENSATION RAG

Arthur Marshall, Artie Mathews, James Scott

TOPLINER RAG

THE ALASKAN RAG

The Composition of "Nightingale"

RAGTIME NIGHTINGALE

AMERICAN BEAUTY RAG

The Naming of "Contentment"

CONTENTMENT RAG

PATRICIA RAG

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A STUDY IN CLASSIC RAGTIME

Recorded at 2229 E. 21st Street, Brooklyn, New York,
August 12, and August 22, 1959. Recording by S. B.
Charters, with assistance by Ann Charters.

SIDE I

- Band 1. COTTONTAIL RAG (Unpublished)
- Band 2. EXCELSIOR RAG (John Stark & Son, 1909)
- Band 3. CLEOPATRA RAG (John Stark & Son, 1915)
- Band 4. The Meeting with Scott Joplin.
- Band 5. SENSATION - A RAG (John Stark & Son, 1908)
- Band 6. Arthur Marshall, Artie Mathews, James Scott.
- Band 7. TOPLINER RAG (John Stark & Son, 1916)

SIDE II

- Band 1. THE ALASKAN RAG (R. Darch, 1959)
- Band 2. The Composition of "Nightingale"
- Band 3. THE RAGTIME NIGHTINGALE (John Stark & Son, 1915)
- Band 4. AMERICAN BEAUTY RAG (John Stark & Son, 1913)
- Band 5. The naming of "Contentment".
- Band 6. CONTENTMENT RAG (John Stark & Son, 1915)
- Band 7. PATRICIA RAG (John Stark & Son, 1916)

East Twenty-First Street, where Joe Lamb lives in Brooklyn, is in a substantial, middle class neighborhood not far from Coney Island. The houses are crowded together along the sidewalk, most of them two story, but there are small yards and trees; so it's a pleasant street to walk along. It's an older neighborhood, but there are young couples living in several houses and their children rush across the yards when school's out. Joe's daughter Patricia lives a few doors up the street, and she and her husband have six children themselves. It's a noisy street during shopping hours - the "U" Street shopping district is right at the corner - but during the rest of the day the neighborhood is quiet. The neighbors who have lived near the Lambs for nearly forty years know Joe as a sincere, friendly man, busy with his family. He's been retired for several years; so he's around the house during the day, and often he'll have to take over the feeding of a new grandchild while his wife runs across the street to make sure the roast her daughter has left in the oven isn't burning. His children still regard the house as partly their own, and the grandchildren usually think of their grandmother when their mother is busy and they need some first aid or a cookie.

Photograph from Joseph Lamb



Joseph Lamb, about 1915

One afternoon ten years ago the jazz writer Rudi Blesh walked down East Twenty First Street looking at the house numbers, trying to find Joe's house. Harriet Janis, who was with him, waited on the sidewalk while Rudi walked up the steps to the Lamb's white frame house and rang the bell. It was an afternoon in the middle of the week; Joe was at work and his wife was doing some shopping. Rudi was going to give up when a neighbor called out to him to try Patricia's house. Rudi walked across to Patricia's while Harriet waited at the Lamb's. When Patricia answered the door Rudi asked her if she knew of someone named Joseph F. Lamb. She said that her father was at work, but that he would be back later in the afternoon. Rudi turned around and began shouting to Harriet,

"We found him! We found him!"

There had been another side to Joe's life. A side that most of his neighbors in Brooklyn didn't know anything about. Between 1908 and 1919 Joe Lamb had written some of the most brilliant ragtime compositions published in America. His publisher, John Stark, had said of Joe,

"Lamb has the gift of melody and the genius of harmonization unsurpassed by any writer of popular music."

During most of these years Joe was living in Montclair, New Jersey, where he was born on December 6, 1887. He was married to a girl he'd known most of his life, and he was working days in a New York fabric house. Then his wife died, while she was still young. Joe remarried a few years later and moved to Brooklyn. When Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis began gathering material for the first historical study of ragtime, *THEY ALL PLAYED RAGTIME*, Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, Knopf, New York, 1950, members of John Stark's family looked through the records of their father's publishing business and found Joe's old Montclair address. Rudi and Harriet asked around Montclair and some of Joe's old neighbors remembered that he had moved to Brooklyn. Rudi looked him up in the telephone directory; then he and Harriet drove to East Twenty First Street and began looking for the house number.

A great deal has been written about the relationship between the primitive musical styles of the American Negro and the rhythmic style of ragtime, but Joe is certainly a startling contradiction to all the theories. His family is Irish Catholic, and Joe grew up playing for entertainments put on in his church or leading his small orchestra for neighborhood dances put on by the Knights of Columbus. The only ragtime he heard was the sheet music he bought when he came into New York. He liked the music so much he began writing it himself, and after his meeting with Scott Joplin (described on Side I, Band 4) his *Sensation Rag* was published by John Stark and for the next eleven years Stark continued to publish Joe's rags. He was one Stark's most successful composers. There is now general agreement that the three greatest writers of ragtime were Scott Joplin, a serious, dedicated Negro pianist from Texarkana, Texas, James Scott, a younger Negro pianist from Neosho, Missouri, who brought his first rags to Joplin for suggestions, and Joseph Lamb, the tall, enthusiastic young man from Montclair who played his first rags over for Joplin at the boarding house Joplin and his wife owned near Times Square. Despite the early influence of Joplin's compositions Joe's rags reflect his own individuality and his finest rags have a permanent place in the ragtime repertoire.

Sometimes Joe would play the piano for friends in Brooklyn and sometimes the neighbors would hear him working over a new composition, but his family and his children took most of his time. In the Twenties and the Thirties ragtime seemed to have been almost forgotten. Joe didn't even talk about his years as a composer. He kept copies of his rags in the piano bench, but they were piled in with a lot of other music and he didn't play them regularly. When Rudi and Harriet found him he wasn't even able to play his rags for them. He was still composing a little, and he was able to play some of his newer compositions for them (*COTTONTAIL RAG*, Side I, Band 1, is one of the later works), but he had almost forgotten the difficult and demanding rags like *ETHIOPIA* or *EXCELSIOR*. It had been so many years since ragtime had been popular that at first Joe didn't believe Rudi was serious about his book. The first evening Rudi and Harriet came over to dinner Joe took Rudi aside and asked him what he was going to do with the information he was asking for. Rudi, a little surprised, answered,

"I want to include a chapter about you in the book we're doing."

Still unconvinced, Joe asked him,

"How much is it going to cost me to get my name in your book?"

Rudi had to spend the rest of the evening telling Joe about the interest in the early musical styles that had been growing since the late Thirties. Joe was not even aware that younger pianists were beginning to record his rags. He had let the copyrights lapse on all of his compositions and he had to make immediate arrangements with the Melrose Music Company to transfer the rights.

Since then Joe has had occasional visits from young enthusiasts, he has been playing again, and there is a copy of Rudi's book on a shelf in the front room in case any visitors drop in. Even the neighbors have heard most of his rags. Until he began these long hours of practise that went into this recording the only recording he had ever done of himself was a tape he had made of several of his newer rags. He hasn't written them down, and he was afraid he might forget them if he didn't get them recorded. He is having considerable difficulty with his hearing and many of the newer rags may never get transcribed, but all of them are on his tape. A young pianist named Bob Darch, who is a great admirer of Joe's rags, has bought the publishing rights to seven of the unpublished compositions, and a beautifully printed edition of *THE ALASKAN RAG* should be available in the near future.

These recordings of Joe's playing were done in his living room over a number of afternoons in August, 1959. His Knabe upright was pulled away from the wall and the recording equipment was scattered around on the furniture. Mrs. Lamb was usually in the kitchen fixing dinner, and she'd come in, still wearing her apron, to listen for a minute. Two or three times the recording had to wait while she used the noisy electric beater to get the potatoes mashed. Usually after dinner Joe would sit talking about his friends and his family.

Joe's hearing difficulty made it very difficult for him to hear the music clearly, but he felt that it was very important to have the recording finished and he worked very hard during the weeks it took



SENSATION

A-RAG

Composed by
Joseph F. Lamb.

ARRANGED by
Scott Joplin.

Published by
STARK MUSIC Co
NEW YORK ST. LOUIS

to get the final versions of his rags. Since the revival of interest in ragtime it had become confused with jazz and jazz pianists were playing ragtime with considerable improvisation and with a rhythmic emphasis that completely altered the character of the music. The great ragtime composers, like Joplin, Scott, and Lamb, felt that their music was essentially melodic, and an overemphasis of the rhythm usually almost obliterates the melodic line. And, too, they labored over their music, and every note was to be played as written. Improvising was considered a trick of "low-class" players. Joe not only did not improvise when he was playing, he played from the music to be sure of every note. His rhythm was almost classical in style, with the gentle glide of dance music rather than the exhibitionist flurry of the vaudeville ragtime that is still popular. After nearly sixty years of playing and writing ragtime Joe still found it as fresh and exciting as ever.

Sometimes sitting over dinner it was hard to remember that the elderly man sitting beside me was Joe Lamb. Sometimes we talked about ragtime, but usually it was about the grandchildren or about people we had known during his life. In talking with Rudi Blesh Joe said of himself,

"I didn't want to be in the music business - I hardly met any musicians except Scott Joplin - I wanted to keep my music in my private life. I didn't want to make any money on my things. I only wanted to see them published because my dream was to be a great ragtime composer..."

There have been few men who have so fully realized their dreams as Joe Lamb.

This group of rags was chosen to give as complete a picture of Joe Lamb's music as possible. Both his first published rag, SENSATION, and his latest published rag, THE ALASKAN RAG, were included, as well as rags in every "Lamb style". Like every other major ragtime writer Joe wrote rags of great difficulty, like EXCELSIOR and TOPLINER, and simpler, less demanding rags like CLEOPATRA and PATRICIA. He wrote equally well in both styles of ragtime. His unpublished rags add considerable stature to his reputation as a composer. Only twelve of his rags were published during the period of ragtime's greatest popularity, which is a small number compared to Joplin's thirty-two rags, seven rags written in collaboration with others, two ragtime waltzes, and two ragtime operas: or to James Scott's thirty rags. The new rags indicate that Joe continued to develop his individual style.

THE ALASKAN RAG, one of the unpublished manuscripts, is one of his most interesting compositions, and there is considerable inventiveness in the writing. It seems to be the only rag written with a rest taking the place of the initial beat in the first measure of the first strain. The measure is written -



Joseph Lamb, 1959 Photo by S. B. Charters

ALASKAN RAG

Joe seems to have worked on his rags to an even greater extent than Joplin or Scott, and his music is marked with passages of great complexity which have been very painstakingly thought out in terms of the whole piece. Sometimes the entire composition is written in a very difficult key. When Joe brought EXCELSIOR in to Stark the publisher suggested that Joe try transposing it. It was written in the key of Db, modulating to Gb. Joe brought it back transposed into an easier key, but they both agreed it didn't sound as good; so Stark published it in the original version, even though the composition was too difficult for the average pianist. Joe's description of the composition of THE RAGTIME NIGHTINGALE gives some idea of his approach to the music.

From time to time Joe would try to pick out which of his rags he liked the best. Often it was the brash, assertive SENSATION, with its thoughtless exuberance, sometimes it was the stately THE RAGTIME NIGHTINGALE, sometimes the beautifully lyric AMERICAN BEAUTY or the intense TOPLINER. But it was soon evident that he had a great pride and affection for all of them. In his playing, and in his approach to the music, this feeling is very evident.

Samuel B. Charters