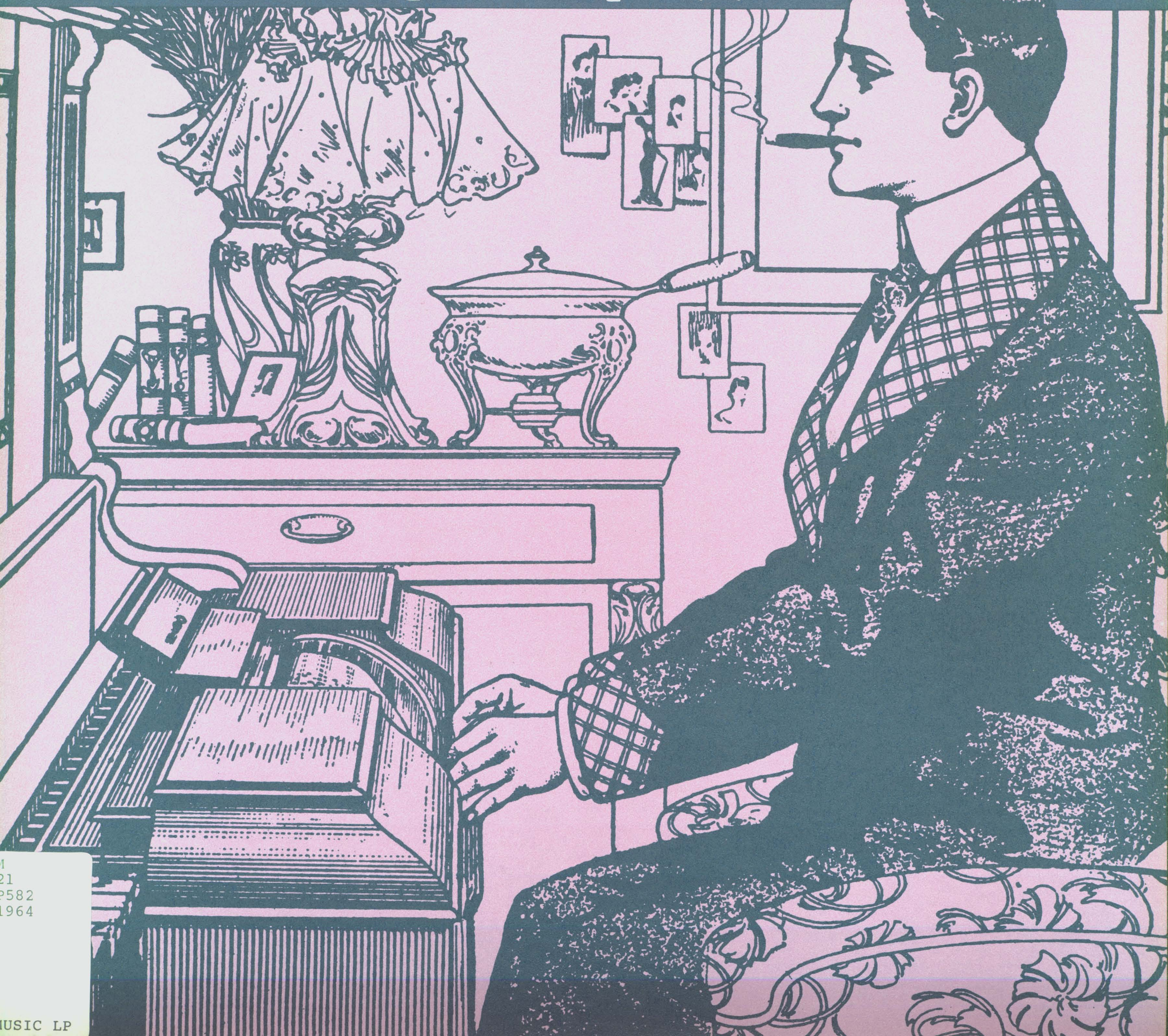


# THE PIANO ROLL

RBF 7

Compiled and Edited by Trebor Jay Tichenor



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1964

MUSIC LP

# THE PIANO ROLL

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**RBF 7**

FOLKWAYS RBF 7

BUBBLING SPRING  
SOUTHERN JOLLIFICATION  
BEAUTIFUL CREOLE  
FLOREINE  
LET 'ER GO  
TRAIL OF THE LONESOME PINE  
RAG MEDLEY  
SUNBURST RAG

FLOATING DOWN THAT OLD GREEN RIVER  
SOMETHING DOING  
PIANOFLAGE  
DARDANELLA  
SWEET GEORGIA BROWN  
JAZZ DANCE REPERTOIRE  
SATISFIED BLUES  
DR. JAZZ'S RAZ-MA-TAZ

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FOLKWAYS RBF 7

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# THE PIANO ROLL

Compiled and Edited by  
TREBOR JAY TICHENOR

## A STUDY OF THE STANDARD HOME PLAYER PIANO

by Trebor Jay Tichenor

Player pianos were once so popular in America that they were being turned out six times as fast as the population rate. This fact is as amusing as it is astounding today, but it was once true that most families who could afford a player proudly displayed it in the parlour or the living room, and it was quite an event in many homes when a popular roll company issued a new release. Most players of course had obvious limitations of expression, but the music that poured out was essentially live and everybody from the rural districts to the cities pumped away hours at those intricate music machines. The player has an undying fascination; there is something about live music coming from perforations in a moving paper roll that eternally captivates lovers of piano music, especially those who pump their player as virtual performers (those with non-electrified pianos.)

The player era (ca. 1900-1930) fortunately coincided with a period of vital music creativity in American popular music and there was much of both the ragtime and early jazz periods recorded on rolls. In the earliest days the pianolas thumped out the new cake walks and rags besides an array of classical music arrangements. Later on in the 20's the new popular pianistic jazz devices were offered to the public, and during the thirty year player heyday an American heritage of popular music was punched into millions of feet of paper.

For all its raging popularity of yesteryear, the player piano has rarely been a subject of serious study except for a recent (1961) work by Harvey Roehl entitled The Player Piano Treasury, which comprises a written and pictorial history of all types of mechanical pianos and related instruments.

There were three basic types: the standard home player piano, the expression and reproducing piano, and the coin-operated commercial nickelodeon in all its infinitive variation. The complex reproducing pianos such as the Ampico and Duo-Art were capable of reproducing the performance of an artist to the finest nuance. Catalogues reveal that the primary interest with these reproducers was in classical music performed by well-known artists of the time, though each company maintained a popular roll output. Although it possessed less expressive power, the "standard" home

player, made by many companies in many variations, was the machine that reached most homes in America during the player era. In this record any concern is totally with the standard upright home player and the music that was played on it from its beginnings in the late 1890's through the 1920's.

The history of the mechanical piano extends back farther than we generally realize. Most or all of this material has been compiled by Mr. Roehl. His book is highly recommended for the interested student or collector.

A Frenchman named Fourneau patented the "pianista" in 1863<sup>1</sup>, an archaic mechanism operating on pneumatic principles which was pushed up to any piano. More experiments and improvements in the late 1800's were due largely to W.B. Tremaine and Elias Needham, and during this decade there existed a thriving business of player organs. Eventually, in 1897, the first cabinet style push-up player reached the commercial market. It was called the Angelus and was built by the Wilcox and White Co. In 1900 the Aeolian Co. came out with the "pianola"<sup>2</sup> and the term became generic for any make of push-up player or in fact any of the later players. These devices were all bulky, heavy mechanisms which activated 65 of the 88 keys of any piano they were pushed up to. This push-up or piano player made a tremendous impact on the public, but foresighted manufacturers were already working on a self-contained player-piano to supersede the clumsy pianola. The advent of the player was greeted with the predictable diversity of opinion - those who "damned it as a Philistine and those who hailed it as a new purveyor of good music."<sup>3</sup> The slogan was "perfection without practice", and the rush began. Various companies began pouring all sorts of rolls on the market of varying sizes and widths. In 1902 one player pioneer, Melville Clark, perfected a unit to play all 88 notes of the piano. He extended the original wide perforations to number 88 and consequently the rolls, issued on the "Apollo" label, were large, measuring 15-1/4" in width. Clark's Apollo player reflected the chaos of the early varied roll widths being issued; his piano was manufactured to adapt to any of the current rolls: "58", "65", "70", "82", or his 88 note roll, all of different widths, but of the same wide perforation. During the early 1900's the standard 88 note roll was being perfected, and in 1910, at a convention of piano manufacturers in Buffalo, standardization was finally achieved.<sup>4</sup> Thereafter the two standard types of rolls both measured 11-1/4" in width, the 65 note with the wide cut, and the new 88 note roll with the narrow cut familiar today. Several companies manufactured "combination" pianos to handle either type of roll, and the piano used here is an Aeolian Stuyvesant combination built around 1912. By 1906 the sale of pianolas was all but dead, though there is in existence at least one combination pianola.

Although the player piano industry continued to thrive through the 20's, the phonograph was making inroads as early as 1907; but both industries grew simultaneously as the American public gradually developed the habit of passive listening. By 1919 players constituted more than half the output of American piano factories,<sup>5</sup> and a peak was reached in 1923 when 205,556 players were made against 142,033 straight pianos.<sup>6</sup> The depression dealt a fatal blow, and in 1932 not a single player was manufactured.<sup>7</sup> The phonograph had meanwhile gained impetus during the dance craze of the last half of the ragtime era (circa 1910-1920) and with the movies and the advent of radio went on to eclipse the boisterous player almost entirely. In the 1950's a player revival began and several new

machines were made. It is interesting to note that the first new device was a portable one not unlike the original pianola; and one brand of the spinet player today has an odd range of notes somewhat reminiscent of the early days of piano rolls. Only the U.S. piano roll firm, the QRS (Quality Roll Service) Co. remained in business and still issues rolls. Today the player revival has necessitated the rebuilding of old pianos, a tricky business that has developed the proportions of an art. The old players are complex mechanisms and each one it appears presents a few new problems. Mr. Roehl has covered the history and development of the mechanical aspect of the player. The mechanism itself is a masterpiece of engineering which, though virtually outmoded today, took a century to evolve.

The audience for piano roll music is divided. There are those whose pianos are a diversion, a "game room gimmick", as Max Morath put it,<sup>8</sup> and the serious collectors of varying taste who are busy gleaning every conceivable type and style of old roll music.

The problem here was to choose a group of rolls which would present an overall picture of the potentialities of the standard home player, and, moreover, the most typical styles of music played on them. It is necessary first, however, to insert a note on the actual manufacture of the rolls. Much confusion in this regard has been generated by a lot of speculation and misinformation. Intensive research largely by Mike Montgomery and Len Kunstadt points to the fact that all rolls made before 1913 were cut mechanically, i.e., arranged from the sheet music. All major companies hired arrangers to create interesting roll versions of all sorts of compositions. It was not until 1913 that methods were devised so that an artist's actual performance could be pounced into paper.<sup>9</sup>

Each roll chosen here presents a different facet of the player piano and its repertoire.

In the earliest player days the appeal seems to have been largely for classical music lovers as each person develops his or her ability on the foot pumps to "interpret" great classical work. In fact the Metrostyle Company manufactured classical rolls exclusively as late as 1906. Dynamic variation on most of the earliest rolls was left largely in the hands of the pumper. Most of this was effected by varying the pressure on the foot pumps and by a use of the sustaining and soft pedals which were operated by manual devices as one pumped along. Later 88 note rolls had slots cut in the left side which automatically activated these sustaining pedals, and the expression pianos like the Metrostyle Thermodist had a few added devices to vary dynamics. The reproducing pianos, of course, had complete expressive power.

The first selection here, Bubbling Spring, was chosen as an example of a light classical work in the florid style which was so popular on the old pianolas. In addition to the usual blue line wandering lengthwise over the roll to indicate dynamic variations, this brand had a red line which was to be followed by the tempo lever. The difficulty encountered in following both lines makes one realize what an art it once was to interpret these rolls.

Southern Jollification, composed by a St. Louisan, is an interesting example of pre-cake-walk material,

one of the many forgotten "plantation scenes" supposedly depicting various facets of Southern life. Here there are the typical strains of the plantation songs interpreted among several dramatic banjoistic passages reminiscent of Gottschalk's La Bamboula & Banjo.

Around 1897 there was a flood of cake walks and "characteristic marches", the latter phase having been adopted to circumvent the prejudice against popular music readily associated with Negroes. Amid the hundreds of such tunes published, the collector occasionally finds one of rich melody and charming originality, and Beautiful Creole is one of the finest. By the early 1900's the popular roll market was growing rapidly and dozens of cake walks appeared in the catalogues of several major companies, such as the Aeolian Company.

The above three rolls were probably all made before 1910 and were for the push-up pianola. The following are all standard 88 note rolls.

Waltzes were extremely popular on the old rolls, especially during the Hawaiian waltz craze around World War I. A notable early waltz was Floreine, written and published by a young Indianapolis composer during the ragtime era. Its honesty and melodic charm made it a standard during the player era.

Let 'Er Go is one of the many marches issued with a much embellished arrangement. This one was probably done by Mae Brown of the U.S. Music Company, who was probably the most gifted arranger of mechanically cut popular rolls. Note the tremolo melody in the third or trio strain, along with the florid treble work. Later such tremolo or "lace curtain" devices were developed and advertised on marimba waltzes, and as saxophone and even cello imitations. Such roll labels bore the musically meaningless subtitles "cello rag" or "jazz rag". Rolls like Let 'Er Go were very popular and were designed to exploit the mechanical piano to its fullest.

Trail of the Lonesome Pine is one of the machine-cut rolls of a song from the ragtime era. The U.S. Music Company specialized in popular music, and one of their features was the somewhat florid embellishment. Their treatments frequently went so far as to transform the melody by syncopated devices. These rolls are interesting pre-jazz material. The final chorus, probably executed by Mae Brown, surpasses almost any other in its inventiveness that I have ever run across on mechanically cut rolls. This practice of speeding up the final chorus extended on into the 20's and can be heard on Jazz Dance Repertoire below.

The Rag Medley, arranged by Max Hoffman is an ingenious selection of some half dozen popular "coon" songs of pre-1900 vintage. This arrangement was first published in sheet music form by Witmark in 1897 and was popular on piano rolls. Rudi Blesh describes it as a "synthetic rag medley",<sup>10</sup> as it is simply a collection of songs injected with well-chosen syncopated devices. Before 1900 there was a flood of these songs, written and promoted mostly by negro composers and performers. Though the lyrics are for the most part unrepresentable today, the melodies, consequently unheard for over 50 years, are frequently fine cake walk strains. The longer medley rolls were used at dances and the early movie houses.

Sunburst Rag was chosen as an example of the hundreds of ragtime piano rolls issued during the

period: 1900-1917. Most of the old rags were machine-cut as methods had not yet been devised to hand-cut rolls during the rag roll heyday. This is a great classic rag of 1909 by James Scott, one of the top three ragtime composers.

Side 2 presents examples of hand-played rolls, those of post-1913 vintage. One of the earliest hand-played series were the Rhythmic rolls. The pianist for Floating Down that Old Green River went on to become the most popular roll artist of all time; Pete Wendling later cut most of his rolls for the QRS Company. This is one of his earliest efforts, and is an excellent example of the commercial ragtime style of the latter part of the ragtime era.

Something Doing is the piece de resistance. It demonstrates in its quiet eloquence what beauty has been preserved on some of the old rolls. It was fortunate that the hand-played methods were devised in time for the greatest of ragtime composers, Scott Joplin, to cut the six rolls he left us. This rag was published in 1903 and was probably written earlier in Sedalia, Mo. during the earliest years of the midwestern classic rags. It is a typical early Joplin and Hayden rag of beautiful flowing melody. These precious few rolls are rare evidence of how the master rag composers played their music in those days. One of the interesting features is the fast bass work in sixteenths which Arthur Marshall, Joplin's old colleague, upon hearing the roll, verified as characteristic of Joplin's playing. Tribute must go to the Connorsized Company here not only for the Joplin performances, which apparently sold well, but also for virtually the only hand-played series of ragtime piano rolls after 1914.

Pianoflage is one of about twelve such popular one-step rags by Paul Whiteman's pianist. These were written around 1920 and are the development out of the older Sedalia and St. Louis ragtime styles. The move was from beautiful flowing melody to dazzling technical devices as are evidenced in this performance. Roy Bargy and Zez Confrey, composer of Kitten on the Keys, led the development of one-step rags.

One of the most popular and beautiful melodies from the late ragtime period was Dardanella. Supposedly the bass work in the music score is the first written example of what came to be known as Boogie-Woogie. The Baxter-Kortlander team made many of the duet rolls popular around 1917. One of the pianists played the melody, frequently in tremolo, while the other executed syncopated obligatto in the high treble range. Thus the tradition of older arranged rolls was continued.

Lee Simms has been described as Eddy Duchin of the 1920's. He possessed one of the most prodigious techniques in evidence on rolls. Sweet Georgia Brown is typical of the popular song roll output of the 1920's. The emphasis here was on an arrangement devised to add interesting touches of embellishment without transforming the melody which consequently recurs again and again without much change. My choice here is both typical and exceptional, as such a florid treble work near the end of the roll is rare. In retrospect it appears that the roll companies were afraid to change melodies in the full, true spirit of jazz. The last three rolls here demonstrate the extent to which jazz performances were recorded on rolls during the 20's. Most of these were subtitled "jazz one-step" or "blues", and it appears that under the sanction of these terms the performer was allowed a bit more freedom.

Pete Wendling was the most popular jazz piano

stylist, though his work is steeped heavily in the flashy commercial ragtime piano school of earlier days. Jazz Dance Repertoire is an interesting composition which calls in review most of the popular dances of the late ragtime era and early 1920. Wendling had an undeniable gift of rhythm and a flair for interesting transformation that was always tasteful. This roll ends with the popular one-step flourish. The spirit of these endings is close kin to the final chorus of jazz band performances of the period.

Good, honest blues performances are rare on old rolls; still, there were many sincere solos by gifted artists. Lemuel Fowler was a Negro pianist who is remembered more for his records than his dozen or so excellent piano rolls. Probably his best known blues was Satisfied which he performed for two roll companies. This QRS version has an honesty and feeling that was unfortunately almost eclipsed by a myriad of commercial blues rolls.

Dr. Jazzes Raz-Ma-Taz, previously unissued on records, is one of the finest stomp performances by the "Daddy of the Harlem Piano", James P. Johnson. This flamboyant stride school with its technical brilliance was a natural for piano rolls, and remarkably fine performances such as this were apparently very popular.

I regret the omission here of several roll artists such as Jelly Roll Morton and J. Russell Robinson, but the listener will experience a more or less balanced cross section of piano roll music in this choice. My exclusion of a heavier classical work is on the grounds that these rolls were infinitely more successful on the reproducing player.

Research into the significance of the home player has just begun; work by men like Kunststadt and Roehl is bringing to light facts about a heritage of American music which, along with the record output of the period, embodies some thirty years of music creativity. However, the importance of the piano rolls must be defined and qualified by the facts pointed out above. Probably the most important problem that has not yet been fully studied is how much and in what ways the hand-played rolls were edited after the initial performances. An obvious and useful criterion for analysis is whether all the notes or various phrases, etc. are humanly possible or probable.

Although there are countless outstanding performances of non-jazz material, such as the waltz and march rolls, I feel it is obvious that the jazz material is the most vital body of hand-played rolls. The question of editing has a great bearing on the jazz roll output; more explicitly it is important in determining the actual abilities, style and ultimate artistic value of roll performers indicated on the labels. One rarely comes upon a jazz roll performance as exciting as a piano record from the same period. Certain Morton, Johnson, Waller and Fowler rolls and other scattered examples, are exceptions to this statement, but really few of these rolls are as exciting as the records by these men. The basic reason is the limitation of expression in the home player. In a historical perspective, this fact becomes vital in the transition from ragtime to jazz, i.e., when the performer becomes more important than the composer. In this light the home player failed to keep up with the musical developments that can be heard on records of the same period.

Most of the rolls bought by the public were produced by a very few leading companies<sup>11</sup>. This situation was unlike the record business in which a wider variety was offered by smaller subsidiary companies who could issue series of race records. For example, probably for economic reasons, "race rolls" never existed. The nearest thing to a race roll series are the Vocalstyle instrumental rolls which contain performances by Morton and Charles Davenport, among others; but these were not purposely directed toward a Negro market, as it seems such a market did not exist, as that for race records. Finally, there was generally much less freedom allowed to roll performers, and, due to the fact that the market was controlled by a few companies, exciting jazz performances are rare.

However, in the realm of the earlier mechanically-cut rolls, we may, somewhat ironically, find a most significant contribution of the player piano. Besides an endless array of contrived arrangement devices, the early rolls preserved for us the many excellent (composer-oriented) ragtime compositions. For technical reasons rags were rarely recorded on records as piano solos. Of course the expression problem cannot be overlooked here, since the problem of performing rags is one of interpretation of through-composed material; but still, the importance of the player may ultimately be that hundreds of rags and cake walks were punched out for the music roll audience, comprising the only recordings of countless masterful and important ragtime compositions. The one minor reservation I have to this statement concerns the fact that many of the old rag rolls are over-arranged or embellished. The new rag rolls being cut mechanically today by men such as Hal Boulware, whose rolls can be heard on another Folkways LP, are improvements on the old rag rolls as well as a supplement to those issued years ago.

The development of what were for the most part compensating devices to circumvent the obvious limitations of the home player, and the principles of editing that frequently ignore human possibility, helped create a singular world of piano music in which the human element sometimes manages to triumph over the rigid machine.

Whatever your taste may be in rolls - for rags, jazz, classical or pops, perhaps the redeeming factor in the standard home player's shortcomings is that it pours forth a captivating world of essentially live music.

"The keys continue to move up and down as if moved by a ghost" and the seance of piano roll lovers goes on."<sup>12</sup>

1. Harvey Roehl, Player Piano Treasury (New York, Vestal Press 1961)
2. Ibid, p. 5
3. Max Morath, "Music in the Air", National Educational Television Turn of the Century Series (Denver, Colo., 1962).
4. Roehl, op. cit., p. 13
5. Van Allen Bradley, Music for the Millions (Chicago, Henry Regnery Co., 1957), p. 238.

6. Roehl, op. cit., p. 43

7. Bradley, op. cit., p. 239

8. Morath, op. cit.

9. Hand-played rolls were always advertised as such beginning with their advent around 1913. Catalogues list earlier rolls as "arranged". - Tichenor.

10. Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, They All Played Ragtime (New York, Grove Press, 1959), p. 101

11. The many odd labels that do turn up follow the standards, styles and production methods of the larger companies. - Tichenor.

12. Max Morath, op. cit.

#### NOTES

Acknowledgments - This record could not have been done without the gracious cooperation of Hal Boulware who put his piano at my disposal while my own was being repaired. I wish to thank Sam Charters for his advice and encouragement of the project, and John Watson for several helpful suggestions, also Mike Montgomery for past news of findings on ragtime and jazz rolls and William Singleton for his expert technical information about players.

Biographical Material - Trebor Jay Tichenor - age 23. Finishing up requirements for an AB in Liberal Arts at Washington University in St. Louis. Is a professional ragtime pianist for the ST. LOUIS RAGTIMERS, who have featured early ragtime material as far north as Winnipeg.

Began collecting piano rolls in 1955, has one of the most complete collections of early ragtime rolls besides a varied array of popular, jazz and classical rolls. Is also co-editor of RAGTIME REVIEW with Russell Cassidy.

#### LISTING OF THE ROLLS

##### SIDE ONE - MACHINE CUT ROLLS

- Band 1 BUBBLING SPRING  
Composed by Rive-King on a Metrostyle Roll.
- Band 2 SOUTHERN JOLLIFICATION "Plantation Scene", by Kunkel on an Universal Roll, No. 74907 (D).
- Band 3 BEAUTIFUL CREOLE "Original Cake Walk", composed by Alexandroff on Universal Roll No. 66499.
- Band 4 FLOREINE - "Syncopated Waltz", composed by Schuster on Metrostyle Themodist No. 300744.
- Band 5 LET 'ER GO - March by Will Wood on an U.S. Music roll No. 9982.
- Band 6 TRAIL OF THE LONESOME PINE by Harry Carroll on an U.S. Music Roll No. 65840 B.
- Band 7 RAG MEDLEY, arranged by Max Hoffman on an Electra Roll No. 76142; includes the following: Good Old Wagon (Ben Harney), Isabelle, High Born Lady, Come Back my Honey, Can't Bring Him Back, Mr. Johnson Turn Me Loose (Harney), All Coons Look Alike To Me (Hogan).

Band 8 SUNBURST RAG by James Scott on a U.S. Music Roll.

SIDE TWO - HAND PLAYED ROLLS

Band 1 FLOATING DOWN THAT OLD GREEN RIVER by Joe Cooper, played by Pete Wendling on a Rythmodik Roll No. A 13302.

Band 2 SOMETHING DOING "Rag Two-Step" by Scott Joplin & Scott Hayden, played by Scott Joplin on a Connorized Roll, No. 10278.

Band 3 PIANOFLAGE "Rag One-Step" composed and played by Roy Bargy on an Imperial Roll, No. 513130.

Band 4 DARDANELLE by Fisher, Bernard & Black, played by Ted Baxter and Max Kortlander on a QRS Roll No. 995.

Band 5 SWEET GEORGIA BROWN by Bernie, Pinkard & Casey played by Lee Simms on an U.S. Music Roll No. 43131.

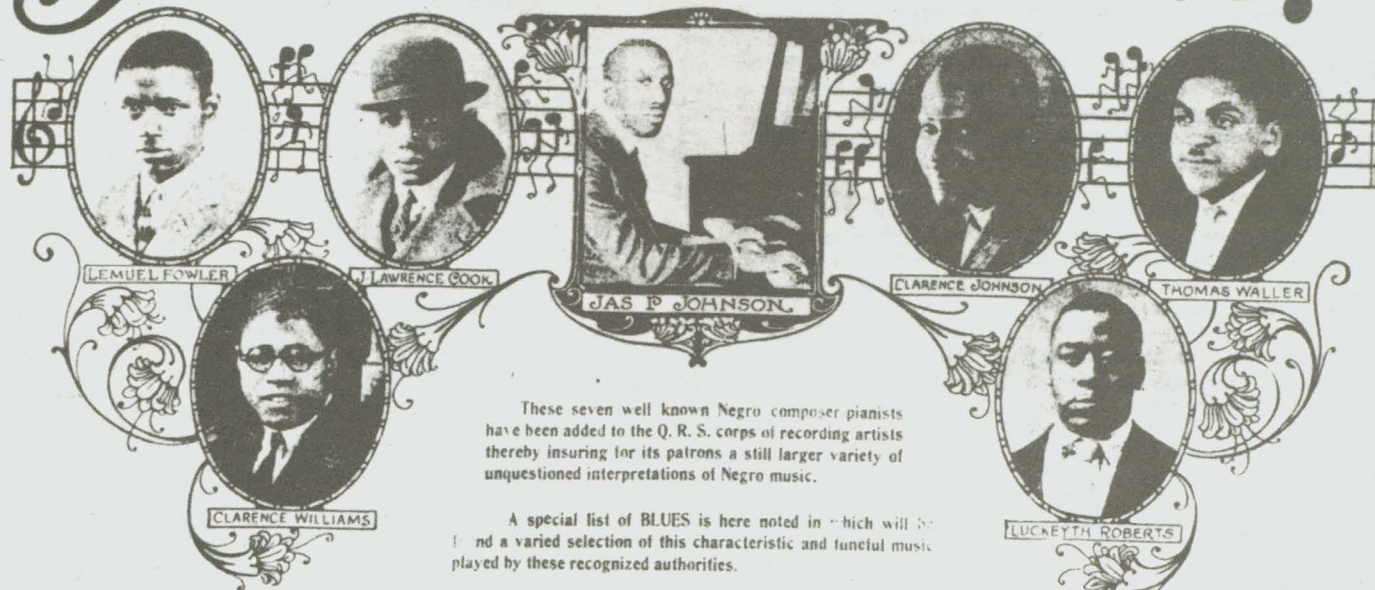
Band 6 JAZZ DANCE REPERTOIRE by Sheldon Brooks and Chris Smith played by Pete Wendling on a QRS Roll No. 1155.

Band 7 SATISFIED BLUES by Lem Fowler, played by Lem Fowler on a QRS Roll No. 2381.

Band 8 DR. JAZZ'S RAZ-MA-TAZ by O'Flynn & Rose, played by James P. Johnson on a QRS Roll No. 1473.

Some time since, the Q. R. S. Music Company announced the addition of a special department through which the characteristic music of the Negro race would be made available for the Player Piano and recorded by artists of their own people thus insuring authoritative interpretations. A still greater success of this department is now assured by special arrangements recently made with additional Negro artists and the Company is pleased to make the following—

# Announcement!



These seven well known Negro composer pianists have been added to the Q. R. S. corps of recording artists thereby insuring for its patrons a still larger variety of unquestioned interpretations of Negro music.

A special list of BLUES is here noted in which will be found a varied selection of this characteristic and tuneful music played by these recognized authorities.

**Q. R. S.**  
**Music Company**  
CHICAGO NEW YORK  
BRANCHES IN  
PRINCIPAL CITIES

2215—BUGLE BLUES  
Played by "Sis" Laney.  
2303—GULF COAST BLUES  
Played by Clarence Johnson.  
2293—HE USED TO BE YOUR MAN  
(But He's My Man Now)  
Played by J. Lawrence Cook.  
2276—LET ME MISS YOU, SWEET PAPA  
Played by "SM" Laney.  
2306—MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE  
Played by "SM" Laney.

2311—MY LOVIN' MAMIE  
Played by J. Lawrence Cook.  
2223—YOU GOT EVERYTHING A SWEET  
MAMA NEEDS BUT ME  
Played by Lemuel Fowler.  
2308—EVIL BLUES  
Played by "SM" Laney.  
1304—HAITIAN BLUES  
Played by Thomas Waller.  
(Latest Blues Branson).

2292—I DON'T LET NO ONE Worry  
ME  
Played by J. Lawrence Cook.  
2122—MAMA GOT THE BLUES  
Played by Thomas Waller.  
2306—MOLASSES  
(From "Go-Go")  
Played by Luckeyth Roberts.  
2100—RAILROAD MAN  
Played by James P. Johnson.  
2324—THE SAINT LOUIS BLUES  
Played by J. Lawrence Cook.

These selections and many others may be purchased from all leading music houses. Ask your dealer for a complete list of BLUES and to place your name on his mailing list for new Q. R. S. B. Rollings which are issued monthly.

**Q. R. S.**  
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CHICAGO NEW YORK  
BRANCHES IN  
PRINCIPAL CITIES

A 1923 advertisement of the Q.R.S. Piano Roll Company, listing blues rolls by 1. to r.: Lem Fowler, Clarence Williams, Luckey Roberts, and Thomas (Fats) Waller.