

RF RECORDS 34

Late Ragtime Piano

COMPILED AND ANNOTATED BY DAVID A. JASEN



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RF RECORDS 34

SIDE 1

RHAPSODY RAG
(Budd L. Cross)
ESTELLE
(Frankie Carle)
SNOWFLAKES
(Rawicz)
GRIZZLY BEAR RAG
(George Botsford)
GRACE AND BEAUTY
(James Scott)
KING PORTER STOMP
(Ferdinand "Jelly Roll" Morton)
SWEET NOTHINGS
(Milton J. Rettenberg) - 1928
COAXING THE PIANO
(Zez Confrey)

SIDE 2

KITTEN ON THE KEYS
(Zez Confrey)
RAGGING THE CHIMES
ROCK ISLAND ROCK
(Mel Grant-1950)
WINTER GARDEN RAG
(Abe Oiman-1912)
SMORGASBORD
(Anders Burman-1950)
ANNIE'S RAG
(Eddie Smith)
BILLY'S RAG
(Billy Hamilton)
POVERTY RAG
(Harry J. Lincoln-1909)

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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

COVER PHOTO BY WALKER EVANS
Mule Team and Poster, Alabama, 1936
Collection of the Library of Congress

RF RECORDS 34

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1977

LATE PIANO RAGTIME

Compiled and Annotated by David A. Jasen

MUSIC LP

Piano ragtime on records began at the end of 1912 when Mike Bernard recorded Wallie Herzer's "Everybody Two Step" (RAGTIME PIANO INTERPRETATIONS, RBF-24). Since then, it has continued to flourish with each era contributing its share of composers and performers. The companion volume, EARLY PIANO RAGTIME (RBF-33), documents the first two decades of ragtime played for the instrument for which it was originally written—the piano.

This album, then, celebrates the next three decades by introducing new names, styles and compositions. Curiously, there is one holdover, the inimitable Jelly Roll Morton (1885-1941), whose career spanned the decades and provided constant illumination of the most vital American music, Ragtime. He is also not unknown as a unique figure in jazz history.

There has been little done for these later periods of piano ragtime—collecting and sampling the best of the artists—on long-playing albums. With this issue, we hope to correct this imbalance, and with a little encouragement, further albums can be issued of this important material, now sadly out-of-print.

Away from the original impetus of ragtime, the revival decades have had great changes in the way ragtime was played and in its very sound. The forties found jazzmen discovering ragtime and re-introducing it to the public, so that it swung more than it did when originally popular. The fifties found a sound they liked by recreating a slightly out-of-tune and tinny sounding piano. It was also a contradictory time for performers on disc. On the one hand, fabulous studio pianists—men who could play every kind of music brilliantly and flashily—were asked to record ragtime. On the other hand, many small independent labels were started to feature a local boy—some dedicated pianist who loved ragtime and played nothing else in his hometown.

This album then has them all—the jazzmen (Wally Rose, Knocky Parker and the extraordinary Jelly Roll Morton), the studio pianists (Billy Mayerl, Winifred Atwell, Frankie Carle, Freddie Slack and Ray Turner), and the local ragtimers (Mel Grant, Lee Stafford, Eddie Smith and Billy Hamilton). Yet, no matter who plays it, there remains a charm about it and happy feelings surge through the listener. There are a few standard rags and a few originals and even (bless us) a few unknown to those present. It all makes for happy listening.

SIDE ONE

RHAPSODY RAG, by Budd L. Cross, was published in 1911 and not recorded until Winifred Atwell (a native of Trinidad) made this disc in the mid-fifties. It is typical of the Tin Pan Alley way of moulding the classics to fit the latest popular framework. Franz Liszt was an easy mark for the Alley boys and his stuff went over well. Winnie gives it her all and it comes out a winner.

ESTELLE was written by its performer in 1930 and recorded by him in 1940. Frankie Carle started his career as a lightweight boxer but wisely decided to skip some keys rather than continue with the rope. His first job as band pianist was with the Boston orchestra led by Edwin J. McEnelly (see RBF-27 and 29) and just before striking out on his own as bandleader and solo pianist, Frankie was with Horace Heidt's dance band. This tune is one of the last Novelty rags written with a ballad-like flavor.

SNOWFLAKES is a delightfully lilting syncopated piano piece written by Rawicz of the duo piano team, Rawicz and Landauer. A spiritual kin to ESTELLE, it was written and recorded in 1942. The team was a favorite with the British public for many years, appearing over the BBC and in many theatrical houses.

GRIZZLY BEAR RAG was composed by George Botsford in 1910 and was such a success that Irving Berlin wrote lyrics to all but the Trio and the song version became even more successful. This rag, slowed down, became the prototype of the animal dances which started the decade and culminated with the one that lasted—the fox trot. Wally Rose, featured pianist with the Yerba Buena Jazz Band, made this solo in December, 1947.

GRACE AND BEAUTY, one of the most unforgettable rags by James Scott (1886-1938), was given an unusual jazz treatment by John "Knocky" Parker in April, 1949. His concept shows a great deal of thought and makes good musical sense. It also shows Knocky's profound debt to the piano styling of Jelly Roll Morton.

KING PORTER STOMP was among the last recordings made by its composer, Ferdinand "Jelly Roll" Morton. Although copyrighted in 1924, Jelly claimed to have written it in 1906. A favorite rag, with Jelly as well as the public, one of his earlier versions can be heard on RBF-33. Quite a difference in the two, which only reaffirms the jazzman's propensity and Jelly's genius for improvisation.

SWEET NOTHINGS was written by studio pianist Milton J. Rettenberg in 1928, a rather late Novelty rag. In an even later recording, England's answer to Zez Confrey, Billy Mayerl, made this beautiful rendition. For more of Mayerl and his own ragtime compositions, see RBF-30 ("The Syncopated Impressions of Billy Mayerl").

COAXING THE PIANO was one of Zez Confrey's (see RBF-28, "Zez Confrey, Creator of the Novelty Rag") marvelously original Novelty rags of 1922. It is performed by Ray Turner, probably the most skillful pianist to appear in America. Born in St. Joseph, Missouri, he came to the musical world's attention when he became one of the two featured pianists with Paul Whiteman's orchestra. His performance with teammate Harry Parella of Confrey's KITTEN ON THE KEYS may be heard on "Ragtime Piano Interpretations," RBF-24. After many years working for the major Hollywood studios, Ray made a few Novelty ragtime sides to show how it was originally done by him. This recording was made in 1952. It hasn't been topped yet!

SIDE TWO

KITTEN ON THE KEYS, perhaps Zez Confrey's most famous Novelty rag, was finally copyrighted in 1921, two years after he had recorded it on a piano roll. This version by Freddie Slack in 1945 illustrates just why Slack became famous. He was a boogie-woogie pianist, and it showed great imagination to take this famous Novelty rag and change rhythm into a boogie-woogie. He does so with great skill and musicianship. A fascinating recording.

RAGGING THE CHIMES and ROCK ISLAND ROCK were composed and performed by the creative Minnesotan, Mel Grant, in 1950. In RAGGING THE CHIMES, Mel merely continues the tradition established by Percy Wenrich decades earlier with his RAGTIME CHIMES, followed in the twenties by the Novelty rag, CHIMES (see RBF-33). With clever twists, like adding a bit of Stride to his creation, Mel came up with an original design. ROCK ISLAND ROCK seems to conclusively demonstrate Mel's grasp of Stride ragtime. At the same time, one can hear in the second section a bit of listening to Will Ezell. A fresh approach to old forms gave Mel Grant a decided place as a creative ragtimer.

WINTER GARDEN RAG was written by song-writer and publisher Abe Olman in 1912 but had to wait until Oakland, California pianist Lee Stafford recorded it in 1950. What raises this from the typical Tin Pan Alley product of the time is the imaginative third section.

SMORGASBORD RAG was composed in 1950 by Swedish drummer, Anders Burman. It is performed by the two outstanding pianists of Stockholm, Reinhold Svensson and Charles Norman, under their pseudonyms of Ralph and Bert Bergh.

ANNIE'S RAG by performer Eddie Smith was typical of the pseudo-country ragtime prevalent in the fifties. It owes much to George Botsford's 1908 favorite, BLACK AND WHITE RAG, in character. Probably the most successful of this type of ragtime was Del Wood's RAGTIME MELODY of 1951 and which Eddie Smith had just recorded prior to his "original."

BILLY'S RAG was done in the early fifties by Billy Hamilton, a pianist in Hollywood. An unusual combination of the simple Tin Pan Alley rhythm mixed with the licks and breaks of the complex Novelty ragtime period. A most enjoyable "original."

POVERTY RAG was composed by Harry J. Lincoln in 1909, and like so many other rags, was left in recorded limbo until the fifties when this recording by Billy Hamilton made its debut on disc. A very nice Tin Pan Alley rag with strong rhythm accompaniment ends this album of late piano ragtime.

CREDITS

Programmed and Notes by David A. Jasen

Mastered by

Documentation: RECORDED RAGTIME, 1897-1958, by David A. Jasen, Archon Books (995 Sherman Avenue, Hamden, Conn. 06514).

SIDE ONE

1. Rhapsody Rag - Winifred Atwell
2. Estelle - Frankie Carle
3. Snowflakes - Rawicz & Landauer
4. Grizzly Bear Rag - Wally Rose
5. Grace and Beauty - Knocky Parker
6. King Porter Stomp - Jelly Roll Morton
7. Sweet Nothings - Billy Mayerl
8. Coaxing the Piano - Ray Turner

SIDE TWO

1. Kitten on the Keys - Freddie Slack
2. Ragging the Chimes - Mel Grant
3. Rock Island Rock - Mel Grant
4. Winter Garden Rag - Lee Stafford
5. Smorgasbord Rag - Ralph & Bert Bergh
6. Annie's Rag - Eddie Smith
7. Billy's Rag - Billy Hamilton
8. Poverty Rag - Billy Hamilton