essay in ragtime

ragtime piano classics
played by Ann Charters
cataract rag - wall street rag
solace, a mexican serenade
magnetic rag - victory rag
ethiopia rag - pastime rag 3
echoes from the snowball club
ray time waltz - harlem rag
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essay in ragtime
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ESSAY IN RAGTIME

ragtime piano classics

played by Ann Charters
HARLEM RAG
ARRANGED BY
D.S. De Lisle,
COMPOSED BY
TOM TURPIN.
Published by
Robt De Yong & Co.
St. Louis, Mo.

From the collection of Rudi Blesh
AN ESSAY IN RAGTIME

Samuel B. Charters

One night, late, a young ragtime enthusiast and I were standing on a wet street corner arguing about the relationship between the two musical styles, ragtime and jazz. He finally flung his arms up impatiently and dismissed the entire jazz style with the shout, "They were TRYING to play Ragtime - and COULDN'T!"

His statement was a little too sweeping, but it was as true as the statements that most jazz enthusiasts make about ragtime. Usually ragtime is discussed, and dismissed, as little more than an interesting step in the development of early jazz. Jazz, and the emotional attitudes that surround it, have had such an effect on the modern imagination that every form of the Afro-American musical culture is regarded as a factor in the development of jazz. For the first time there are signs that other musical forms, the blues and the gospel song, are receiving some attention, but ragtime, in many ways one of the most brilliant musical achievements of the Negro in America, has been sadly neglected. In part this is due to the nature of the music itself. Its grace and elegance are too restrained for an audience that is used to the melodrama of jazz. As a musical style it is in the Nineteenth, rather than the Twentieth Century. But in a larger part the neglect of ragtime has been due to unfamiliarity. Not only is it impossible to hear performers who play classic ragtime, it is even impossible to hear recordings of the music at anywhere near its best. Because ragtime's popularity came in the years before the phonograph was able to successfully reproduce the sound of a piano, ragtime was limited to performances on mechanical pianos. There have been modern recordings of these piano rolls, but they sound just like what they are, mechanical pianos. There is only one known recording which, despite the title, seems to catch the sound of classic ragtime as it was performed in the years before the first World War, Felix Arndt's 1915 recording of DESCENTION RAG (A CLASSIC NIGHTMARE) on Victor Record 17608. The label reads,

"Introducing ragtime perversions of 'Humoresque' (Dvorak) - '2nd Hungarian Rhapsody' (Liszt) - 'Rustle of Spring' (Sinding) - 'Impromptu' (Chopin) - 'Militaire Polonaise' (Chopin) and Chopin's 'Funeral March'."

The handful of other recordings by ragtime players of the period, Mike Bernard and Frank Banta Jr., the best known, are marred by a noisy tastelessness.

Even more distressing to the ragtime enthusiast is the lack of recordings of the finest rags. The compositions of Scott Joplin, James Scott, Joseph Lamb, and other creative ragtime composers were not recorded in any form, and there are not even piano roll versions of much of the music. As a result only a few people have even heard much classic ragtime.

In 1951 Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis published their excellent study of the music, THEY ALL PLAYED RAGTIME, and it seemed for a time that there would be a serious revival of interest in it. But in the last nine years there has been very little accom-

photo from Rudi Blesh
This "Essay in Ragtime" is intended as a study of the finest classic ragtime. The first published rag by a Negro composer, Tom Turpin's HARLEM RAG, is included in its original 1897 version, with the series of variations showing the difference between ordinary and "rag" rhythms. Three of Scott Joplin's most ambitious rags, WALL STREET RAG, MAGNETIC RAG, and the "Mexican Serenade" SOLACE, are included. There is the famous test piece, CATACTAG, by Robert Hampton, Joseph Lamb's difficult ETHIOPIA RAG, two late rags by the brilliant James Scott, VICTORY RAG and RAG SENTIMENTAL, and one of Artie Mathe's ragtime studies, FASTTIME RAG NO. 3. The most creative ragtime writers thought of their music, not as noisily rhythmic, which is the usual feeling about it today, but as gracefully melodic. They wrote dance music of every type using the beautifully syncopated ragtime melodies. As an example of this the first ragtime waltz, ECHOES FROM THE SNOWBALL CLUB, written in 1896 by the young Detroit Negro, Harry P. Guy, is included as well as Joplin's SOLACE, a ragtime tango.

These rags, played from torn and faded old music sheets or from laboriously hand copied manuscripts, show more clearly than any descriptions could show, the brilliant musical achievement that is classic ragtime. These young writers took the dance music of their time and transformed it, using Negroid rhythmic concepts to give it a new vitality and excitement. In Scott Joplin, too, ragtime had one of the great melodists of Nineteenth Century popular music. His music sings, in the way that Foster's or Bland's music sings. The close relationship between ragtime and popular dance music limited it to a certain style of performance and to a brief period of popularity, but it is its variety and musicality within these limits that has given it much of its charm. It is the charm of an older and quieter way of life, the life of the naive and sentimental America of the turn of the century.

WALL STREET "RAG"
Victory Rag

Not fast

JAMES SCOTT

First page of Victory Rag

From the collection of Trebor Tichnor
Because of the difficulty of finding recordings of classic ragtime a number of collectors and enthusiasts have begun to play it themselves, and there is considerable friendly competition between the musicians. It is an awkward situation, in a sense as though a blues enthusiast would have to learn to play and sing the blues in order to hear the music, but ragtime is a written music and it is possible to play it in the older styles. The best of these younger pianists is the pianist on these recordings, Ann Charters. There is perhaps some reason to think this is a biased judgement; since she is my wife, but it was her enthusiasm and sensitivity to ragtime that was part of her charm. She was not only the technical assistant on the documentation of Joseph Lamb's playing, but she and Joe discussed the traditional playing style during several evenings. Mrs. Lamb, Joe's wife, listened to the two of them playing one evening and after a moment of thought said, "She comes the closest to Joe of anybody I've heard playing."

Joe Verges, a New Orleans pianist who cut piano rolls for Q.R.S. in 1916 and 1917, was another stylistic source. Usually during the course of a night at the barroom where he plays sentimental songs he could be talked into a performance of LOVIN' RAG or THAT BRASSIN' RAG. There have been hours of listening to the early recordings and piano rolls, long talks with Rudi Blesh, the co-author of THEY ALL PLAYED RAGTIME. The result, after years of playing, is a highly individual style that is well within the idiom of the classic ragtime period. Since ragtime is a composed music rather than an improvised one these performances should not be thought of as "re-creations", any more than a performance of a Chopin mazurka is a re-creation. Here is an attempt to express the musical ideas of the great ragtime composers within the stylistic and emotional limits of their own period. It is this young pianist's musicianship and attention to the ragtime style that gives this "Essay In Ragtime" much of its validity.
Missouri Was the Birthplace of Ragtime

Widow of Music Publisher Recalls

Legenday Scott Joplin and How His Music Took Country by Storm

By Dorothy Brockhoff

Miss Brockhoff is a free-lance writer who lives in Norman, Okla. She is a former research­ er for the Missouri Historical Society and a graduate of Washington University. She holds a master's degree in political science from Columbia University.

FOR REASONS which currently bewitch, bother, and bewilder even the wisest social historians, Americans have suddenly developed a fondness for a by-gone era, the Victorian Age. Iron bedsteads and overstuffed sofas, once the slowest selling items in the antique trade, are rapidly becoming as hard to find as a Indiana Jones movie. Strangely enough, this zest for the "good old days" includes not only as unauthentic a piece of furniture as a claw-footed bathtub and other turn-of-the-century furnishings, but also an interest in some of the music of that period.

Ironically, it is not the sentimental barber shop songs that are being revived, but the syncopated ragtime rhythms, many of which were once played in Missouri toward the end of Victoria's long reign. A few weeks ago, NBC TV pro­ duced a three-hour tribute to ragtime featuring Hoagy Carmichael and Missouri's own Ralph Sutton, and currently KETC (Channel 9) is running a bi-weekly ragtime series.

For many of today's population, these ragtime compositions are completely new, but for some of the old timers, it brings back a flood of memories. One of those who remembers this era with a touch of wistfulness is the youthful-looking 79-year-old Kirkwood grandmother, Mrs. Carrie Brumfield of St. Louis.

It came as a surprise to many viewers to learn on the NBC show that Sedalia and St. Louis were once the rag-time capitals of this country, but it was news to Mrs. Stark. For it was her late husband, Will, and his father, John, who first published many of the greatest ragts in the music publishing business, including the immortal "Maple Leaf Rag" by the best of all the rag-time composers, Scott Joplin.

Reminiscing about the firm of John Stark & Son and how it came to print this classic, Mrs. Stark recalled that it was back in 1899 that the meeting took place between丁on Stark and his famous son. "They were very different," she emphasized, "but most of them have been very kind to me. Until the day Will died in 1949 he never tired of laughing at some of the highly amusing anecdotes that he read, and of telling me exactly how he happened to meet Joplin.

"According to Will," Mrs. Stark explained, "Joplin wandered into the Stark store in Sedalia one day holding the Maple Leaf Rag" manuscript in one hand, and a little boy's hand with the song on it. Joplin asked to play the piano, and began to play the now-famous tune while the youngster stepped it off. Grand­pa (John Stark) thought nobody would play it because it was too difficult, she recalled, "but Will was so taken with the lad's dance, that he decided to buy it."

"That was the real begin­ ning of the Stark publishing business," she declared. Prior to that, the Starks had concentrated most of their energies on selling pianos and organs. Will, it seemed, had an organ out to a farmer's house in an old wagon," she continued, "and Will left it there for a week. When they came back, the farmer had become so attached to the instrument, that he would buy it.

The original Sedalia issue of the "Maple Leaf Rag" is quite rare. Unlike later editions printed by the firm, this first copy featured a green maple leaf on the cover. The Sedalia composition carried a drawing of four figures on the opening page. Viewers of the NBC television show heard one of the four arrangers of this piece ever presented, Mrs. Stark believes. Four pianists including Carmichael and Sutton climaxed the coast-to-coast ragtime show with a special rendition of "Maple Leaf Rag," which displayed all of the fiery brilliance which Joplin originally incorporated into his early compositions.

Sadly enough, Mrs. Stark doesn't own a copy of her most famous song, published under the name of Cy Perkins, it was called "They Gotta Quick Kick!" My Dawg Around," and was issued as a campaign song for Champ Clark, Speaker of the House of Representatives, who was a seeking the Democratic nomi­ nation in 1912.

"I get the idea from a hill­ billy song," she related, "and created my own song. I chose to call it myself Cy Perkins because that sounded like a good hillbilly name, and might make the music sell better," she added with a grin. The cover featured a drawing of an old hound-dog, and it became as popular as Lassie is today. Hound-dog buttons were sold all over the country, hound dogs appeared on vaudeville stages, and the newspapers ran stories about the song and its creator.

Some years ago, Walt Disney heard a copy of "They Gotta Quick Kick!" and became so intrigued with it, that he wrote Mrs. Stark and asked for a copy. She searched frantically, but was unable to locate one. Recently, a perfect copy of the song turned up in the collection of the Missouri Historical Society, and Mrs. Stark proudly autographed it for him.

Busy with her song-writing and housework, Mrs. Stark did not get much time at her hus­ band's publishing business, 3138 Laclede avenue, and so she contacted Joplin personally. "But my hus­ band often talked of him," she added. "He remembered that Joplin would often be walking down the street, when a melody would strike him, and he would take out a piece of paper and put the song over here," he said.

Piano rolls of Joplin's, still available, make this quite clear. Joplin played the piano, and which pianists find impossible to imitate exactly.

In St. Louis where he lived for some years, Joplin could be heard in the so-called Chestnut Street "music meathall", along the levee. Last year, a young student of music and music publishing, Mr. C. Cotter, described this region and Jop­ lin's appearances in a master's thesis called "Negro in Music in St. Louis." In his comprehen­ sive study, Cotter devoted a large section of his work to the early ragtime pianists of this city.

He related that because of circumstances, most of the ragtime "headache balls" were used to earn their living playing in saloons and sporting houses. Perhaps the most famous of these ragtime centers was Tom Turpin's Rosebud Cafe, still standing on Market Street, but about to be destroyed by the "headache ball" to make way for the Mill Creek redevelopment project. Tom Turpin, a noted ragtime composer and pianist himself, attracted all of the early ragtime creators and pianists to his cafe. And it was here that Joplin played many of his early com­ positions including "Peacheeaten Rag", "Swingee Cake Walk" (written in collaboration with Arthur Marshall); and "Sun­ flower St. Louis." (His two songs with collaboration with Scott Hay­ den.) These pieces were all published by the Stark firm.

In 1902, Joplin abruptly stopped playing in saloons, and made only occa­ sional appearances. His prob­ lems, which had plagued him for many years, had now reached their peak, and it voted his time to composing "classic rags" for it was his desire to write music that was as good as the best of European music. During this period, he wrote "Gig No. 1" and "Willow." "Palm Leaf Rag"--A Slow Drag," and "Something Doing." It was during this time that Joplin wrote many, many songs including "Hallelu­ trope Bounce" with Louis Chauvin; "Palletty Rag" with Hayden; "Enphalos Sounds," and "Pineapple Rag" to list just a few.

Joplin also wrote two operas in addition to his other works. In 1903 he published a ragtime opera called "A Guest of the City." It was performed only once—in St. Louis.

Mrs. Stark muses that it was too bad that her husband and his father couldn't have lived to see it on television. For over the years, both of them came to love this piece which launched them on a new career. Shortly after the Stark brothers published "Maple Leaf Rag," they moved to St. Louis "because they thought they would have a better chance of putting it over here," she said.

"They started turning out the song on a hand-press in a hotel room and sold it for 500 copies by this crude process. Then they swapped them for a small printing-plant in this city, and John Stark & Son were in business.

Unfortunately, the Stark family fell behind in the机械化 of music, and copyrighted only the sheet music, reserving the "headache ball" for either ragtime piano-rolls or rec­ ords—all of which came later.

"Some people think 'Maple Leaf' and the other rags made us rich," Mrs. Stark said with a chuckle. "But unfortunately that just isn't so. Eventually, the copyrights ran out on the sheet music, and we never made a dime on the thousands of rag-­ time piano rolls which became so popular. Now, of course, it is obvious that Will and his father made a mistake in not protecting their rights to this early music, but in those early days it was difficult to see what lay around the corner—musically-speaking. And besides, the Starks had enough problems with the mind at the time, just trying to keep their struggling little firm going.

In addition to supervising the day-to-day operations of the new music publishing business, Will Stark became the star salesman for the new company and began making the rounds of all of the large department stores in town trying to drum up interest in the new rags.

"In those days," Mrs. Stark explained, "many stores employed pianists or song pluggers to play compositions for sale in the music department. I was employed at the Washington Avenue department store to do just that, and that's how I met Will. He wan­ dered in one day and said, "Tremendous! If I would take 'Maple Leaf' home and learn it. I did it and be­ gan pounding it out at work as often as I dared."

Will listened and must have liked what he heard, because he came back around to the Boston em­ porium, and a few years later

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