

## Scott Joplin (1868-1917)

Scott Joplin, "The King of Ragtime," was born in Texarkana, TX, but nobody is sure exactly when he was born. The 1870 census shows him to be around 2 years old.

His father was a former slave in North Carolina, and his mother was a freeborn black woman from Kentucky. Dad played the violin and mom played the banjo and sang. When his parents separated, his mom supported him and his five siblings by cleaning houses, and in one of the houses was a piano. He was allowed to play that piano and began teaching himself when he was six years old. He later received free piano lessons from a German teacher named Julius Weiss.

He was great at improvisation (in other words, making up music on the spot), and when he was 14 years old, he left home as a traveling musician. He got work in churches and saloons, and he traveled throughout Arkansas, Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Texas. He settled in St. Louis, Missouri at age 17, which was the hotbed of ragtime music. In 1884 he moved to Sedalia, Missouri and began composing marches, songs and waltzes. In 1899 he was playing at the Maple Leaf Club of Sedalia, and he just happened to be his piece called *The Maple Leaf Rag* (written in honor of the club). A music publisher named John Stark came in for a drink and heard the piano solo. Stark fell in love with the music, bought it from Joplin, published it, and made a fortune on this one piece. With the success of this piece, Joplin was able to establish himself as a piano teacher and composer.

Later Joplin moved to New York City, where he wrote a valuable guide to the basics of ragtime style, called *School of Ragtime*. He also composed a black folk opera called *Treemonisha*, but it wasn't successful. The opera was revised after his death and remounted in the 1970s, where it was successful. He won the Pulitzer Prize for this work in 1973, which was awarded to him posthumously.

The phenomenal success of the Maple Leaf Rag sparked a nationwide ragtime craze. Hundreds and hundreds of rags were published. One entrepreneur even opened a chain of ragtime instruction schools, including a branch in Honolulu. Just as with jazz, rock 'n' roll, and rap, there were those who hated this new trend ("The counters of the music stores are loaded with this virulent poison"). But the tide turned quickly. By 1905 even President Roosevelt's daughter was a ragtime fan.

And ragtime could have been like other fads in popular culture: famous for 15 minutes. But instead, Joplin's goal of creating works that would be both popular and "art" music seems to echo through American music: in the careers of Gershwin, Ellington, Bernstein, Mingus, Sondheim, and many others. And 100 years later, as some of the following suggests, ragtime continues to revive and reappear, not only in the musical world, but in literature, film, and theater.

Scott Joplin wrote about 50 piano rags, two operas, a few songs, waltzes and marches before he died on April 1, 1917. Although he wrote mainly for piano, many of his rags have been arranged for various ensembles, including brass bands. His music fell into obscurity after his death, but it had a huge revival in 1973 when it appeared as a movie score for *The Sting*. This was the first time a movie brought back an important, all-but-forgotten musical genre. Ragtime has been popular ever since!

While in NYC, Joplin recorded a few piano rolls during the last year of his life. He had lost much of his piano-playing ability due to illness, but these rolls shed light on his style. In 1974, at the first Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival in Sedalia, Missouri, America's second and third generation ragtime performers gathered with their admirers where Joplin had performed 70 plus years before. A climactic moment came in a concert dedicated to Joplin's music. Richard Zimmerman, the artistic director, had the house darkened and a single spotlight lit a lone piano on the stage. After a brief silence, the old piano began playing Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag" piano roll. When the last note sounded, the audience was stunned to silence and then erupted in gales of cheering applause. For those few moments, the "Entertainer" (Scott Joplin's nickname) had once more enthused an audience from the tiny holes in a roll of paper now forever enshrined in our National Recording Registry.

## **RAGTIME TIME-LINE**

1899 Publication of the Maple Leaf Rag (advertised "as high-class as Chopin.")

1903 The first recording of Maple Leaf Rag

1907 Joplin moves to New York.

1907 In Paris, Claude Debussy writes his rag-inflected Golliwog's Cakewalk. (The cakewalk was one of the ancestors of the rag.) Other modernists who will help themselves to ragged rhythms are Erik Satie, Igor Stravinsky, and Paul Hindemith.

1911 Irving Berlin writes "Alexander's Ragtime Band."

1918 Young pianists like James P. Johnson and Jelly Roll Morton are studying and performing Joplin's works, but introduce elements of rhythmic drive, showmanship, and improvisation. New styles are being created: stride piano, and jazz, which will eclipse ragtime as a popular trend.

1950 Authors Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis write an important book, *They All Played Ragtime*, based on interviews of surviving veterans of the golden age of ragtime, including Joplin's widow Lottie.

In the 1950s and 1960s, ragtime leads a fringe existence. Quietly, here and there, change is stirring. In small numbers, musicians - many of them classical composers and academics by day - are beginning to look at ragtime in fresh ways. Composers like William Bolcom and William Albright write new rags. Joshua Rifkin, a musicologist and expert on baroque music, makes a recording of Joplin rags for the Nonesuch label. In contrast to the "honky-tonk" style that most people associate with ragtime, Rifkin's performances are elegant, wistful, slow. The record becomes a best-seller. Gunther Schuller rediscovers the arrangements used by bandsmen in Joplin's day (the "Red Back Book"): it too is a best-seller. Joplin becomes the dominant composer on the classical charts. The great ragtime revival of the 1970s is underway. Soon, ragtime shows up everywhere, from recitals to TV commercials.

1973 Film director George Roy Hill overhears the record his teenage son is playing in his room. It's Schuller's "Red Back Book." Hill decides to use the music in his movie, *The Sting*.

1975 E. L. Doctorow publishes his novel, "Ragtime," which investigates themes of race, class, and injustice. It melds historical characters like Houdini and Stanford White with fictional ones, including a Joplin-like musician named Coalhouse Walker. In the same year, *Treemonisha* is produced on Broadway.

1976 Joplin, now more widely recognized than he ever was in his life, is awarded a special Pulitzer Prize in music.

1981 The movie version of Doctorow's *Ragtime* appears, with a score by Randy Newman and a cameo appearance by James Cagney.

1983 The posthumous awards continue for Joplin when the United States Postal Service issues a stamp of the composer as part of its Black Heritage commemorative series.

1998 *Ragtime: The Musical*, based on Doctorow, opens on Broadway. It wins four Tony awards.

1999 Ragtime continues to suggest possibilities to composers. The newest offshoot, the Terra Verde style, uses abundant Latin rhythm (as did Joplin's *Solace*). Some composers: Brian Keenan, Hal Isbitz, David Thomas Roberts.