

# RAGTIME\*

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## Abstract

A brief history of ragtime music

Just before the twentieth century began, a craze for "ragged music" swept the United States. After enjoying great popularity for a few decades, ragtime faded, as all crazes do. But it left a permanent mark on American music. Not only was ragtime itself one of the first widely popular styles of music that actually developed in the U.S., but it also played a major part in the development of a style that has been called "America's music": jazz.

## 1 Origins

There are four main types of ragtime music. The only type still commonly heard today is the "**classic instrumental rag**" that was so popular in ragtime's heyday. This is usually a march-tempo piece for piano or band, with a steady "boom-chick" bass and a very syncopated<sup>1</sup>, or "ragged", melody. **Ragtime songs**, many of which were not particularly ragged, and **ragtime or syncopated waltzes**, in 3/4 meter, were also popular in ragtime's golden age.

The fourth type of ragtime began well before the ragtime era and is still practiced today by jazz musicians. This is the practice of **ragging** an existing piece of music. To "rag" a piece of music is to take a well-known tune and change the rhythm of it to make it syncopated, or "jazzy"-sounding.

Syncopation was always a prominent feature of African-American music. While European (and European-American) music explored counterpoint and complex harmonies, the music of west Africa expressed most of its complexity in its rhythms. People taken from Africa to the Americas as slaves brought this rhythmic complexity with them to their new countries. There it could be heard in many places: the slaves' practice of "patting juba" or "clapping juba", Afro-Caribbean dance rhythms, banjo dances, and the practice of giving familiar songs a new "ragged" rhythm. The traditions of banjo dances and of "ragging" were both major influences in classic ragtime.

## 2 Classic Ragtime

The end of the American Civil War brought emancipation to the slaves, but not true economic or political freedom. Efforts by former slaves after the war to improve their own lives were met with strong resistance from many whites who did not want to deal with them on an equal basis. Laws were passed legalizing racial discrimination and making it practically impossible for many non-whites to vote. The only types of

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<sup>1</sup>"Syncopation" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11644/latest/>>

jobs made available to them were poor-paying menial labor, with three exceptions: teacher, preacher, and musician.

Black musicians had long been accepted by white America, even during the slavery era, although only within the boundaries of "low-class" entertainment such as dances and minstrel shows. In the 1890's a black pianist was not acceptable in the concert hall; a black piano player in a church or a red-light district bar or brothel was a common sight. But one such piano player, who in the late 1890's often played at the Maple Leaf Club in Sedalia, Missouri, was taking the first big step that would eventually lead to widespread acceptance of African-American musicians as serious artists. Recognition as a composer of serious music was Scott Joplin's<sup>2</sup> goal as a musician, a goal he did not achieve in his lifetime. But his "Maple Leaf Rag" was a tremendously popular hit that helped spark a nation-wide ragtime craze.

Joplin did not invent ragtime. It was already played by many musicians, black and white, in St. Louis and Chicago. Other composers had already published "piano rags", and in fact most published rag composers throughout the period were white. But the piano rags of Scott Joplin, and of another black composer, James Scott, were of such high quality that they were a mainstay of the popular piano repertoire for decades. Ragtime rang out from pianos in homes, clubs, theaters, dance halls, and saloons across the country, and many of the best-selling rolls for player-piano were ragtime.

### 3 Lasting Influence

By the 1920's ragtime was considered "old hat". New crazes came along, and new kinds of music. But ragtime continued to be performed and recorded, and it clearly had a major influence on early jazz greats such as "Jelly Roll" Morton, and on early jazz styles such as Dixieland and "Harlem Stride" jazz piano. As jazz went on to develop other styles, ragtime faded and was nearly forgotten. But some enthusiasts who were exploring the roots of jazz began a ragtime revival in the 1940's. The revival gained momentum very slowly until, in 1973, the movie "The Sting" reintroduced ragtime to the general public. Classic rags, particularly Joplin's "The Entertainer", became once again a part of the standard band and piano repertoire. Ragtime continues to be popular with both musicians and audiences and has at last gained widespread respect and recognition as an art that produced works of true genius.

### 4 Suggestions for Further Study

- Listen to some of the classic piano rags. Scott Joplin's "The Entertainer" or "Maple Leaf Rag" are good places to start. Borrow some ragtime CDs from your local library, or look up one of the many websites that include sound files of classic ragtime pieces. As of this writing, the Ragtime Piano MIDI files<sup>3</sup> of Warren Trachtman and a Scott Joplin page<sup>4</sup> are good sources.
- Edward A. Berlin's *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History* (1980, University of California Press) is considered an authoritative account.
- *They All Played Ragtime* (1950), by Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, includes the words and stories of the "ragtimers" who were still around to be interviewed.
- Watch the 1973 movie **The Sting**. The movie is not about music, but the sound track uses ragtime to great effect in evoking moods and setting a nostalgic tone.

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<sup>2</sup>"Scott Joplin" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10879/latest/>>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.trachtman.org/ragtime>

<sup>4</sup><http://www.geocities.com/BourbonStreet/Bayou/9694/>