

SCOTT JOPLIN*

Catherine Schmidt-Jones

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Abstract

For middle school and up, an introduction to the ragtime composer Scott Joplin.

1 Introduction

Scott Joplin is the undisputed "King of Ragtime" music. Many composers, both black and white, published piano rags and other ragtime music around the turn of the twentieth century. But it was the music of Scott Joplin that really captured the public's attention, both then and during ragtime's revival in the second half of the century. The widespread popularity of Joplin's music during his lifetime was the first step on the long road that led to the acceptance of African-American music, and particularly jazz, as an important and serious art.

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Scott Joplin



Figure 1

2 Background

When Scott Joplin was born, the Civil War had recently freed the African-American slaves in the U.S., but almost a century would pass before the arrival of the Civil Rights movement. It would be hard to overestimate the effect this had on Joplin's life and music. Scott Joplin inhabited a world in which a black man's career choices were basically limited to preacher, teacher, musician, or poorly paid manual laborer. A black musician was welcome at church, at a dance, in a saloon or a brothel, playing certain kinds of music. He was not welcome in a concert hall or many other venues where only white musicians were considered acceptable.

The music of Joplin's world came from both Europe and Africa, and, like ragtime¹ itself, Joplin was strongly influenced by both. He probably learned the basics of European classical music from Julius Weiss, a neighbor who was so impressed with young Scott's talent that he offered him music lessons.

But the young Scott Joplin would also have heard, at home, at church, and in nearby fields and saloons, the music of his newly-freed people: spirituals, work "hollers", plantation songs, and "patting Juba".

The influence of both can be clearly heard in all ragtime music, and it is the fusion of the two traditions that gives ragtime, and indeed all the jazz traditions that would later follow, their tremendous energy. In the case of the classic piano rag, the European influence can be seen most clearly in the form of the music, which generally follows the outline of a march, with its repeated stanzas and trio sections. The steady "boom-chick" of the bass is also very march-like. The most obvious contribution of the African influence is the syncopated rhythms which make ragtime so easily recognizable. (For more on this subject, the module Listening to Ragtime will be available soon.)

¹"Ragtime" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10878/latest/>>

3 Biography

Nobody can say with certainty when or where Scott Joplin was born. The best information available seems to point to northeast Texas in 1867 or 1868. He grew up near Texarkana. His parents were ex-slave Jiles Joplin and free-born African-American Florence Givens. Jiles and Florence were both musical - he played violin; she played banjo and sang - and five of their six children also sang or played instruments. Scott's talents, in particular, were apparent at an early age.

He started travelling while still quite young, making a living as an itinerant pianist, and as a vocalist with the Texas Medley Quartette, which included two of his brothers. Eventually, around 1885, he settled in St. Louis, Missouri, the famous "Gateway to the West" that was a major center for rail and riverboat travel. He worked as a pianist at the Silver Dollar Saloon, but he also continued to travel and perform extensively. In 1893 he moved to Chicago, where he organized his first band, played cornet, and met Otis Saunders, another rag pianist. Saunders encouraged him to write down and publish the piano compositions he had been improvising.

In 1894 Joplin and Saunders left Chicago, travelling the midwest again, back to St. Louis and eventually to Sedalia, Missouri, where Joplin settled by 1896. Here he composed, taught, organized another band, and played piano in clubs. He named his second published piece for a Sedalia club, the Maple Leaf. Published in 1899, **Maple Leaf Rag** became a big hit, not only all over the United States, but in Europe as well. Now established as a popular and famous composer, Joplin continued to travel widely, but also spent much time composing. Around 1900 he moved back to St. Louis. Around the same time, he also married Belle Hayden, the sister-in-law of one of his students. They separated, however, and a second marriage in 1904, to Freddie Alexander, ended after only a few weeks when his bride died of pneumonia.

Joplin moved to New York City in 1907, and in 1909 married Lottie Stokes. Until his move to New York, Joplin had published a fairly steady stream of piano rags, as well as a few longer works such as a ragtime opera entitled **A Guest of Honor** but, driven by the desire to be considered a "serious" composer, he now began to devote much of his time to his second opera, **Treemonisha**.

Treemonisha was not a ragtime opera, although it did include a few numbers in ragtime style. Joplin's aim was to write a serious opera which included musical references to all types of African-American music, including blues. The message of the opera is that black people can free themselves through education. But Joplin may have been too far ahead of his time. Even African-Americans could not accept the idea of "serious" music written in a style that was normally found in saloons and brothels. The production in 1915 of **Treemonisha** was a failure. This was a severe blow to Joplin, who was already ill and had been showing signs of mental strain.

In 1916 Scott Joplin was committed to the Manhattan State Hospital, where he died on April 1, 1917. His music faded from popularity as other musical crazes replaced ragtime, and his genius as a composer was not generally recognized until a revival of ragtime led to the widespread rediscovery of his music in the 1970's. In 1976 Joplin at last received the recognition he had always wanted; **Treemonisha** was awarded a special Pulitzer Prize.

4 Music

Scott Joplin's most important works by far are his "classic" piano rags, including "Maple Leaf Rag", "The Entertainer", "The Easy Winners", "Peacherine Rag", "Solace", and "Pine Apple Rag". Although Joplin did not invent ragtime, the extremely high quality of his piano rags popularized the genre with people of all races, preparing the way for the widespread acceptance of jazz. Besides **Treemonisha** and **A Guest of Honor** (which has, unfortunately been lost), his longer works include a sort of ragtime folk ballet entitled **The "Rag Time Dance"**. Joplin also published various songs, marches, and waltzes.

5 Suggestions for Further Study

- Listen to some of Joplin's music. Recordings of Scott Joplin's most famous piano rags are widely available. Look for CDs of ragtime at your local library, or search the internet for ragtime audio files.

As of this writing, this Scott Joplin page² included many audio files.

- Edward A. Berlin's book *King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and his Era* is considered authoritative.
- You might want to start a search for more information at the website of the Scott Joplin International Ragtime Foundation³ . If you live in the area, you may want to visit The Foundation's annual Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival in Sedalia, Missouri or the Scott Joplin House⁴ in St. Louis.

Illustrations by Ellen Rockett⁵ .

²<http://www.geocities.com/BourbonStreet/Bayou/9694/>

³<http://www.scottjoplin.org>

⁴<http://www.mostateparks.com/scottjoplin.htm>

⁵<http://www.ellen@rockettium.net>